



For Immediate Release: November 16, 2017

Media Contact:

Vermont Department of Health
802-863-7281

Vermont Launches Initiative to Help Schools Test Drinking Water for Lead

BURLINGTON – The Vermont Department of Health, in partnership with the Agencies of Education and Natural Resources, is launching a pilot project designed to encourage schools to test drinking water for lead at each tap used for drinking or cooking, and take actions to lower lead levels.

Sixteen schools that get their drinking water from municipal water systems were invited to take part in this voluntary effort, and all agreed to participate. Over the next few months, Health Department and Department of Environmental Conservation staff will visit each school and work with its facility team to inventory and test taps used for drinking and cooking. Water samples will be sent to the Health Department Laboratory for testing, at no cost to the school.

“Water is a critical resource,” said Agency of Natural Resources Secretary Julie Moore. “We are committed to making sure all Vermonters have access to clean and safe drinking water.” Moore explained that any tap that tests over the EPA action level for lead in public drinking water systems will be taken out of use, and state agencies will work with each school to identify fixes and re-test to make sure lead levels have been reduced. In addition, schools will be provided with a toolkit of resources, including information for parents and families.

Schools that have their own drinking water source, such as a well, already test their water for lead in accordance with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. Approximately 150 schools in the state routinely test a portion of their taps as required by the Lead and Copper Rule.

“Lead poisoning is a serious but preventable health problem, with children and pregnant women at greatest risk. This is an opportunity to help schools test their water, identify problems, and take often easy and low cost steps to reduce lead exposure,” said Deputy Health Commissioner Tracy Dolan.

EPA set the action level for lead in public drinking water at 15 parts per billion (ppb). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 1 ppb as the exposure limit. Because there is no safe level of lead, the Health Department encourages schools to reduce lead levels in drinking

water as much as possible. Around the country, recent tests have found many schools have at least one tap with elevated lead levels.

Exposure to lead can damage the brain, kidneys and nervous system, slow down growth and development, make it hard to learn, and impair a child's hearing and speech. In 2016, more than 600 Vermont children under the age of 6 were found to have lead poisoning.

"Children's bodies absorb lead more easily than adults," said Dolan. "The major exposure risk is dust from deteriorated lead-based paint at home, but other sources, like certain toys, jewelry, antiques, salvaged goods and drinking water can add to a person's overall exposure to lead."

The Health Department encourages all homeowners served by public or private water to test their drinking water for lead every five years. The Health Department Laboratory offers the test for \$12: healthvermont.gov/lab/drinking-water

Education officials agree that providing schools with the opportunity to get one-on-one assistance will be a valuable service, complementing initiatives already in place to test for lead in drinking water at child care facilities and homes.

"Ensuring child safety is a shared responsibility. By taking these rigorous steps to make sure lead levels are as low as possible in their buildings, schools can support public health objectives and continue to provide a safe and healthy environment where every student can grow and thrive," said Agency of Education Secretary Rebecca Holcombe.

Data gathered through this pilot project will help inform decisions about whether to implement comprehensive statewide testing in the future.

Learn more about lead in school drinking water:

healthvermont.gov/environment/school/lead-school-drinking-water

Find out more about lead poisoning and what you can do:

healthvermont.gov/environment/home/lead

Explore childhood lead poisoning data:

healthvermont.gov/tracking/childhood-lead-poisoning

For health news, alerts and information: healthvermont.gov

###