FAQ on water testing in Yukon schools – for Principals

What are you testing the water for?

The Government of Yukon tested school drinking water in schools built before 1990 to check lead levels in summer 2018.

What is lead?

Lead is a heavy metal that occurs naturally in low levels in the environment. Everyone is exposed to trace amounts of lead through air, soil, household dust, food, drinking water and various consumer products.

Before 1988, lead was used widely in industry and consumer products. It can be toxic, so there are now strict lead regulations in Canada to reduce the amount of lead humans are exposed to on a regular basis. However, lead may be present in workplaces, industry, schools and residences from products that existed before these regulations were made.

Why might lead appear in school drinking water?

Lead was commonly used in plumbing materials (including drinking fountains and sink taps) before 1988 when national building standards changed to reduce the use of lead. Schools built before 1990 may have used plumbing materials that contain lead, which can slowly leach into the water. The amount of lead present in the water depends on many factors including how long water has been sitting and the design and age of the water faucet.

Drinking water is not generally the most significant source of exposure to lead in Canada but can become a concern in cases where lead can leach from lead plumbing materials.

Is this a health risk?

The Chief Medical Officer of Health advises that there is no short term risk to health associated with water fixtures with levels above the national standards. National standards are based on exposure to lead over a lifetime, and children drink water from multiple sources.

Occasional consumption of water from these fixtures will not be enough to significantly affect the health of students or staff. However, the Government of Yukon is taking steps to reduce the amount of lead that students in Yukon schools are exposed to and by upgrading some of the water fixtures to bring lead levels to as low as possible.

How will you make sure the water is safe?

Water fixtures that have tested above the national standards will be replaced and retested to ensure this has solved the issue.

If there are drinking water fountains that have tested above the national standards, they are being taken out of order and replaced. Other water fixtures will have signs placed at them to indicate they are safe for washing but not drinking until they are replaced.

Will this affect school programming?

We do not anticipate any disruption to regular school programming.

How is lead harmful to human health?

Lead exposure can cause harm to many body systems and can accumulate in the body over time. Lead can affect nervous system development, IQ, behaviour, hearing and vision, the cardiovascular system, kidney function, and reproductive health. The degree of harm depends on many factors including frequency and duration of exposure and individual factors such as age, nutrition, and health.

Individuals exposed to low levels of lead don't usually show any signs or symptoms. Higher levels of lead exposure can result in non-specific symptoms including headaches, abdominal pain, loss of appetite and constipation. In children, symptoms can include clumsiness, agitation, and fatigue. If a child shows these symptoms, it is important they see a medical professional. However, the presence of these symptoms does not necessarily mean that they are due to lead.