

Lead in Water: Testing at Schools (FAQ)

Water at schools is regulated by NYS Department of Health (NYSDOH) and monitored by the local health department. Tompkins County Whole Health's Environmental Health Division works closely with our county school districts to provide oversight and guidance for routine water testing results.

What are the rules for testing lead and copper in school water?

Schools need to test their water for lead and copper because of a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulation called the [Lead and Copper Rule](#). This rule helps make sure drinking water is safe. [Lead usually gets into water](#) from old pipes or faucets, not from the water source itself. If the pipes are corroding, schools can treat the water to lower the amount of lead and copper.

How often is school water tested?

Water at all schools in Tompkins County is typically tested yearly but can occur more frequently.

How is water tested for lead in schools?

Water in schools is tested for lead by [collecting "first-draw" samples](#) from all potable water outlets and having them analyzed in a state-approved lab. "First-draw" samples are the initial streams of water from a cold-water faucet that has not been used for at least 8 to 18 hours to ensure the highest possible concentration of lead is captured. This allows for a "worst-case scenario" lead level to be calculated.

How do we know what amount of lead is safe in water?

[The EPA says no amount of lead is safe.](#) To monitor this, if more than 10% of the water samples have lead levels higher than 15 parts per billion (ppb), the school must take action. This limit, called the "action level," is meant to protect people from unsafe levels of lead.

What happens when the lead level is too high?

NOTIFY:

If the water has high lead levels, the school is **required** to provide notice to users within 24 hours.

PLAN:

The school must come up with a plan to reduce lead levels and submit that plan to Whole Health. Any remediation measures needed will go into effect once the plan is approved. Water will be tested again to ensure that the water is now safe to use.

TEST:

If the water has too much lead, the school must test more water samples. They will need to test the source of the water from the well before treatment, and study how corrosive the water is - if the water is wearing down the pipes and causing more lead to leak out.

REMEDIATE:

Immediate measures might include the following steps to limit use: turn off the affected faucets, provide bottled water or water tower stations, post signs warning against use, etc. Longer term remediation measures may include installation of filters, replacement of pipes, or other steps as recommended by Tompkins County Whole Health.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

How does lead in water impact people?

Lead can enter your bloodstream if you drink water with lead. You cannot get lead into your body by washing your hands or touching the water because [lead does not pass through skin](#). Hot water can have more lead in it than cold water because heat makes it easier for lead to come out of pipes and get into the water. [Boiling water does not remove lead](#).

Do I need to routinely get my child tested for lead?

[All children are required to be tested for lead at ages 1 and 2](#). A family doctor or pediatrician can perform a blood test for lead and provide information about the health effects of lead.

If you have a 1- or 2-year-old, please check in with your child's pediatrician about lead testing. If you have an older child who screened negative for lead at ages 1 and 2 and you are concerned that your child has had recent exposure to lead, please discuss additional lead testing with your child's pediatrician or primary care provider. If your child doesn't have a pediatrician, please call Tompkins County Whole Health to talk to a lead nurse about how to get your child tested.

This screening tool can help identify if your child may need an additional lead test: [Does your child need a lead test](#)

What is the greatest risk of exposure to lead for young children in Tompkins County?

The greatest risk of exposure to [lead for young children in Tompkins County](#) is:

- Lead-based paint and dust or chips from lead-based paint (old paint may be under layers of newer paint)

Other sources of exposure include:

- Take-home exposures from a workplace
- Lead in soil
- Imported products (spices, costume jewelry, decorations, traditional medicines, cosmetics, ointments)
- Antiques

I am concerned about lead in my home or my water, what should I do?

If you live in Tompkins County, you can request a free home visit from the Healthy Neighborhoods Program. This program can do some basic screening for lead paint in the home. [Healthy Neighborhoods Program | Tompkins County](#)

If you are on a public water system, you can view water testing results here: [Public Drinking Water | Tompkins County](#)

If you have a well for water, you can find out how to get your water tested here: [Private Drinking Water | Tompkins County](#)