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NEWS

How you can test for lead in your tap water for free

Hillary Ojeda Press Citizen

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An initiative spearheaded by engineers and researchers from the University of Iowa is trying to understand how much lead runs through the state's tap water sources and is getting residents involved.

In light of National Lead Poisoning Prevention Week, which takes place Oct. 20–26, a multidisciplinary effort is providing free testing kits for people who want to check how much lead is in their drinking water.

Leading the project are the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering in Iowa's College of Engineering; IIHR—Hydroscience and Engineering; and the Center for Health Effects and Environmental Contamination.

Michelle Scherer, Donald E. Bently Professor of Engineering, said the team wants to be able to offer guidance to folks who have high levels of lead in their drinking water.

“A solution is not always going to be expensive or difficult,” said Scherer. “Sometimes, it might be as easy as adding a filter to the tap or flushing the faucet for a minute or two before drinking the water.”

Lead is a heavy metal and neurotoxin which, when consumed, can be especially dangerous for younger children. It can slow growth and cause long term damage to the brain and nervous systems.

Assisting in the project are several researchers and doctoral students, including Danielle Hollingshead, of the Sustainable Water Development Graduate Program.

Hollingshead said there are several sources of exposure for Iowans including lead-based paint as well as the lead in dust and soil.

"Historically, drinking water has not been considered a significant exposure until recent events brought to light how serious it can be," she said. "That's why we are launching Get the Lead Out campaign, to encourage Iowans to test lead in their drinking water."

The crisis in Flint, Michigan, is one of those examples. High levels of lead in the water were brought on by a change in water sources and inadequate corrosion control. Lead leached out from water pipes into the water system.

Scherer says most of Iowa's water systems are good at controlling corrosion.

But to be safe, the university is inviting people to measure the lead content in their homes. Iowans have until Oct. 26 to send an email to get-the-lead-out@uiowa.edu to get their free testing kit.

"The only way to know if you have lead in your water is to measure it. You cannot see it, smell it, or taste it," said Hollingshead.

In the kits are three bottles and a set of instructions. Folks are asked to fill up the bottles and return them to the university for lab testing. It takes about three weeks to produce analyses on the samples and then send out reports, said Hollingshead.

She added other ways to test for lead in drinking water are by contacting the local water provider, the State Hygienic Laboratory, or the Department of Public Health. Hollingshead said it's also a good idea for folks to have their children's blood lead tested if they suspect their may be lead in their water.

In addition to testing water in homes, a researcher from the team will also test water supplies at several public schools in Keokuk and Dubuque.

Reach Hillary Ojeda at 319-339-7345, hojeda@press-citizen.com or follow her on Twitter at [@hillarymojeda](https://twitter.com/hillarymojeda).