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Lead found in water at 2 Navy child care sites

Dianna Cahn
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Ross Taylor | The Virginian-Pilot

This container is what the Navy is using to collect and test lead levels in the water at a child development center at Norfolk Naval Air Station. Photographed on Thursday, March 28, 2013.

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NORFOLK

Navy parents got a dose of unpleasant news as they picked up their toddlers from the child development center at Norfolk Naval Station on Thursday: There's lead in the drinking water.

The Navy conducted voluntary testing at nine child care facilities in the area and found that two of them - located at Norfolk Naval Station and at Joint Expeditionary Base Fort Story - had lead at doses higher than recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Norfolk Naval Station was the only place where the higher levels were found in faucets that children usually drink from, said Liz Nashold, an environmental engineer and environmental director of the Navy's Mid-Atlantic Region.

Of the 72 faucets at the naval station center, seven tested above the recommended levels in the first round of tests, the Navy said in a news release. Five were sinks used for hand washing and two were drinking water fountains inside children's classrooms.

After a second round of testing, which included changing the aerators on the faucets and flushing the pipes by running water, three of the sinks were found to be within acceptable levels, Nashold said. The two non-compliant sinks were out of children's reach and a sign was posted telling staff members not to drink from them.

The water fountains were in rooms 35B and 46B.

In 35B, the fountain tested at 99 parts per billion after not being used overnight; and at 74 parts per billion after a 30-second flush on a different day, suggesting there might be lead soldering further back in the piping.

Similar results in Room 46B started at 66 parts per billion with 33 parts per billion found on a different day after a 30-second flush.

The two water fountains were removed from the center, she said.

Parents were informed of these findings when they picked their children up from the facility Thursday afternoon. Those interviewed said it was a good news/bad news situation.

The bad news: lead in the water.

The good news: "Just the fact that as soon as they found out they let parents know," said Chief Petty Officer Nicol Scott, whose 3-year-old daughter has been coming to the day care center since she was 5 months old.

"If she was showing signs of sickness, I'd be a bit more panicked," Scott said. "But since she isn't, there's no reason to freak out about it."

Petty Officer 3rd Class Alexandria Williams agreed. She said she would take her 2-year-old for testing just to be sure, but she's not too worried.

"At least they brought it to everybody's attention," she said.

The findings reported Thursday were the result of non-mandatory tests for schools. Under EPA guidelines, the tests should not show more than 20 parts of lead per billion - which is equivalent to 20 drops of water in an Olympic-size swimming pool, Nashold said.

She said the Navy plans to test 23 child care facilities in Hampton Roads.

At Joint Expeditionary Base Fort Story, five sink faucets were found with higher than recommended levels of lead. Four are not accessible to children and rarely used, the Navy said in a statement. The fifth was a kitchen sink used by workers to rinse dishes before putting them in the dishwasher. The machine was replaced and a sign was posted telling staff members not to drink from that tap, the statement said.

Nashold said that there is lead in all water systems. It is particularly risky for children, whose growing bodies absorb lead, mistaking it for calcium.

The Navy handed out documents about the testing, the risks of lead poisoning and frequently asked questions. It also set up a hotline and sent letters to parents, said spokeswoman Beth Baker.

Capt. Dave Culler, the commanding officer of Norfolk Naval Station, was at the day care center Thursday.

"We want to be very proactive, very transparent," he said. "Nothing is more important than the health and safety of our children."

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Navy must test for lead in its water systems every three years. The tests require only a sampling of buildings and must show that 90 percent of all samplings have a maximum lead content of 15 parts per billion, Nashold said.

Locally, the Navy's water systems are in compliance, she said.

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