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DRINKING WATER

EPA Should Strengthen Ongoing Efforts to Ensure That Consumers Are Protected from Lead Contamination

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-06-148, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Elevated lead levels in the District of Columbia's tap water in 2003 prompted questions about how well consumers are protected nationwide. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), states, and local water systems share responsibility for providing safe drinking water. Lead typically enters tap water as a result of the corrosion of lead in the water lines or household plumbing. EPA's lead rule establishes testing and treatment requirements. This report discusses (1) EPA's data on the rule's implementation; (2) what implementation of the rule suggests about the need for changes to the regulatory framework; and (3) the extent to which drinking water at schools and child care facilities is tested for lead.

What GAO Recommends

Among other things, GAO recommends that EPA improve its data on key aspects of lead rule implementation, strengthen certain regulatory requirements and oversight, and assess the problem of lead in drinking water at schools and child care facilities. In commenting on a draft of this report, EPA generally agreed with our findings and recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-148.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John B. Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

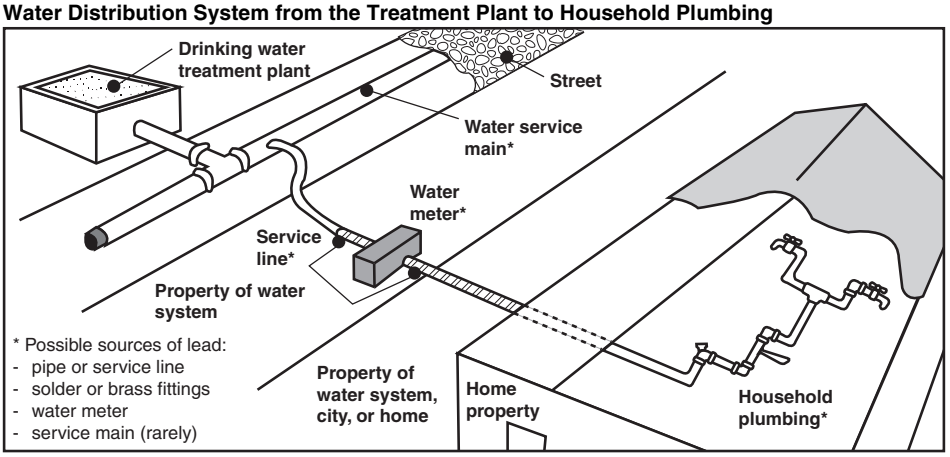
What GAO Found

EPA's data suggest that the number of drinking water systems with elevated lead levels has dropped significantly since testing began in the early 1990s. However, EPA's database does not contain recent test results for over 30 percent of large and medium-sized community water systems and lacks data on the status of water systems' efforts to implement the lead rule for over 70 percent of all community systems, apparently because states have not met reporting requirements. In addition, EPA's data on water systems' violations of testing and treatment requirements are questionable because some states have reported few or no violations. As a result, EPA does not have sufficient data to gauge the rule's effectiveness.

Implementation experiences to date have revealed weaknesses in the regulatory framework for the lead rule. For example, most states do not require their water systems to notify homeowners that volunteer for periodic lead monitoring of the test results. In addition, corrosion control can be impaired by changes to other treatment processes, and controls that would help avoid such impacts may not be adequate. Finally, because testing indicates that some "lead-free" products leach high levels of lead into drinking water, existing standards for plumbing materials may not be sufficiently protective. According to EPA officials, the agency is considering some changes to the lead rule.

On the basis of the limited data available, it appears that few schools and child care facilities have tested their water for lead, either in response to the Lead Contamination Control Act of 1988 or as part of their current operating practices. In addition, no focal point exists at either the national or state level to collect and analyze test results. Thus, the pervasiveness of lead contamination in the drinking water at schools and child care facilities—and the need for more concerted action—is unclear.

Water Distribution System from the Treatment Plant to Household Plumbing



Source: EPA.