In the past year, clean drinking water has become a concern for some residents of Allegheny County. From the discovery of lead in water to recent boil-water advisory in some parts of the city, parents and educators are asking what they should do to protect their children.

Federal and state laws require that public drinking water suppliers test water regularly. The tests might make the water unsafe (contaminated) or have the water treated with a chemical or drink or use. In the summer of 2016, while Pittsburgh residents received letters from their water suppliers, City Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA), that tests from tap water in some homes showed high levels of lead. As PWSA, the City of Pittsburgh and residents continue to work to fix the situation, one question keeps coming up: How do we protect ourselves?

It is important to understand why lead in drinking water is dangerous. No amount of lead exposure is safe. It is especially dangerous to infants, young people, and pregnant women. Lead is stored in the bones and can affect people later in life. In pregnancy, babies can get lead from the mother’s bones. Early exposure cause brain and development damage and cause difficulty learning, communication, and motor skills. In children, lead exposure may also cause delays in speech and lead to learning disabilities.

In some parts of the City of Pittsburgh because testing at one site had revealed a low level of contamination, no harmful levels of bacteria were found, but consumers were cautioned in case any bacteria had gotten into drinking water because of the low levels of chlorine. To make sure drinking water is free of any potential contaminants, Dr. Barchowsky suggests getting tap water tested. Or, consumers can contact their water companies to ask how they are meeting environmental guidelines to keep water clean. He recommends that owners of private wells get their water tested, otherwise, that water is not being tested.

LEAD POISONING

Esther Bush

This month, the ‘Take Charge of Your Health’ page focuses on a timely issue in Pittsburgh—water safety. Pitt’s Jewish Women’s and Men’s Health interest group and the University of Pittsburgh Clinical and Translation al Institute’s Women’s Health Initiative discussed this topic with Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.

JW: How worried should I be about my drinking water?

EB: Jennifer, can you tell me a little bit about water safety?

EB: It’s so important that we as individuals, as a community, partner with the community to help. What is especially important to note is that this is not a problem here because we’re not a developing nation. Recent local events, and other news stories from around the country, show us that water safety and quality are issues we need to be concerned about in the United States—and also worldwide.

JW: In Pittsburgh, there isn’t any lead in the water, right?

EB: That is a topic that I feel very passionate about. Americans have a tendency to think that water is not a problem here because we’re not a developing nation. Recent local events, and other news stories from around the country, show us that water safety and quality are issues we need to be concerned about in the United States—and also worldwide.

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