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## Zero Confirmed Lead Cases Among 390 Tested Children; Public Advised Not to Use Potable Water for Brushing Teeth

**Lead testing update: 15 pending results, 7 confirmed negative, zero positive cases**

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A nurse from the Virgin Islands Department of Health conducts a capillary blood test, commonly known as a finger prick test, to check for lead levels in an elementary school student. By. V.I. DEPT. OF HEALTH

The V.I. Dept. of Health, represented by Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis during the Government House's weekly briefing on Monday, has released new information on lead testing in local schools. This comes in the wake of concerns about elevated lead and copper levels in the

potable water system. In a crucial update, the department has also revised its stance on using potable water for brushing teeth, now advising the public to avoid this due to potential health risks.

According to Dr. Ellis, a total of 390 children aged 0 to 6 years have undergone initial finger-prick lead testing. Out of these, 15 cases are 'detected pending confirmation' and are subject to follow-up confirmatory testing. Dr. Ellis emphasized, "Of the 15, the VI Department of Health has received the results of seven tests which were all returned negative or below the level of concern for lead. To reiterate, to date there have been zero positive lead blood tests."

D.O.H. said its actions align with Governor Albert Bryan's declaration of a state of emergency to combat high levels of lead and copper in the potable water system. Focused on the most at-risk population – children under six – the department has undertaken widespread pediatric blood lead testing.

Dr. Ellis highlighted the importance of confirmatory venous blood draw tests, especially when initial finger prick tests show 'detected pending confirmation' results. She explained, "It is important to note that the finger prick sample is a screening process only, and three percent of the time gives a false 'detected pending confirmation' result and this is not considered a positive."

The department said it has successfully conducted tests at several schools and plans to continue at additional institutions. These schools include Alfredo Andrews, Lew Muckle, Good Hope/Country Day, Claude O. Markoe Elementary, St. Croix Montessori, Ricardo Richards, and Eulalie Rivera. On Tuesday, the teams will test at three schools: Free Will Baptiste, Start Apple Montessori, and Juanita Gardine. On Monday, November 27th, the pediatric lead testing continues at the Pearl B Larsen.

"We extend our appreciation to parents who have taken the crucial step of having their young children tested for lead exposure," Dr. Ellis added.

The department is also educating the public about various sources of lead exposure, emphasizing the risks posed by old lead-based paints, contaminated water pipes, and certain consumer products. Further, the department is addressing concerns related to lead exposure from aviation gas and certain occupations. Lead can be found in homes or buildings built before 1978 when lead-based paints were banned. When the paint peels and cracks, it makes lead dust. Children can be exposed to lead when they swallow or breathe in lead dust.

Lead can also be found in certain water pipes, in products such as toys and jewelry, and in candies or traditional home remedies. Certain jobs and hobbies involve working with lead-based products, like stain glass work, and may cause parents to bring lead into the home. Children who live near airports may be exposed to lead in air and soil from aviation gas used in piston engine aircrafts.

### **Health Hotlines and Information Resources**

Residents with health concerns related to lead exposure and testing may call the Department of Health hotlines from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For assistance, please call 340-712-6299 or 340-776-1519. The Department of Planning and Natural Resources also operates a hotline at 340-514-3666 for water sampling concerns. For more information, visit [cleanwaterusvi.com](http://cleanwaterusvi.com).