

Study Showed Some Chicago Homes With Smart Water Meters Had Higher Lead Levels: Officials

According to the study, 51 of 296 homes tested showed lead levels above the EPA action level after meters were installed

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A number of Chicago homes with smart water meters have tested positive for higher levels of lead, according to a recent sampling by the Chicago Department of Water Management, officials revealed Thursday.

The surprise announcement was made as part of a press conference touting plans to commission a study on replacing the city's lead service lines - the pipes that connect water mains to single-family and two-flat homes across the city.

Buried in the announcement was news that an ongoing study examining the possible impact of water meter installation indicated the meters could raise lead levels in some homes.

"A portion of a relatively small sample of homes that have water meters installed reported increases in lead levels," said Chicago Department of Water Management Commissioner Randy Conner.

According to the study, 51 of 296 homes tested showed lead levels above the EPA action level after meters were installed.

City spokesman Adam Collins said the city "immediately notified" the 51 homes and sent "a team of experts" to look at possible causes and offer up a solution.

"We have initiated this meter study proactively to look at this problem – to define the problem so we can do something thoughtfully and appropriately," said Jury Morita, commissioner with the Chicago Department of Public Health.

According to officials, more study is needed "to analyze the relationship between water meter installation and lead levels, as the increase may not be related to the meter."

Still, out of what the city said was an "abundance of caution," residents getting a meter going forward will be given a free water filter set and those who have had a meter installed will have the option to request a water filter set. Any household previously tested that had higher lead levels will also receive a free water filter set.

Experts also recommend running water continuously for at least five minutes after not using water for six hours or more.

But for some Chicago aldermen, many of whom learned of the problem during the Thursday morning news conference, it is too little too late.

"If you know of a problem and the city has known of this problem since June and you fail to act, you are being very irresponsible," said 29th Ward Ald. Chris Taliaferro.

Environmental groups have also called on the city to be more transparent.

"I was very concerned about the information that I learned this morning," said Jen Wallig with the Illinois Environmental Council. "I hope we can start

working together going forward for a better solution to this problem that is affecting so many of our children.”

The city also announced Thursday that it is commissioning a report to determine “the feasibility and framework of what would be a multi-billion dollar program to potentially replace lead service lines” in the city, said to be “one of the only remaining sources of lead.”

“The safety of Chicago’s water is our top priority,” Conner said in a statement. “Not only will this report ensure that Chicago remains a leader in water quality efforts, the report will help Chicagoans continue to have a high degree of confidence in their water.”

But replacing the lead pipes that feed many Chicago homes could prove to be an expensive proposition.

“The potential there for tens of thousands of homes is going to cost a couple of billion dollars at least,” 32nd Ward Ald. Scott Waguespack said.

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