Lead in Drinking Water

How Lead Gets Into Water

Lead in drinking water usually comes from water distribution lines or household plumbing rather than lakes, wells or streams. Lead from other sources, such as ingesting old-paint chips or dust, can add to the effects of lead in water.

Health Issues

Because the nervous and circulatory systems in young children are not fully developed, lead and other toxic substances can easily enter the brain. Long-term exposure to even low levels of lead can cause irreversible learning difficulties, mental retardation, and delayed neurological and physical development. Infants and children up to age 6 are most susceptible to these toxic effects. Pregnant women exposed to lead can pass the effects to their unborn child. Exposure for adults primarily affects the nervous system. It can impair hearing, vision, and muscle coordination. Lead is also toxic to the blood, kidney, heart, and reproductive system.

Lead poisoning is a particular problem because there may be no unique signs or symptoms associated with lead exposure. Early symptoms of lead poisoning may include loss of appetite, fatigue, irritability, anemia and, sometimes, abdominal pain. Because of the general nature of symptoms at this stage, lead poisoning is not often suspected.

Measuring Lead In Drinking Water

Lead may be present in your home drinking water if:

- There are lead pipes, brass fixtures, or lead connectors in your home or community water system.
- Lead solder was used on your home water pipes.
- You have soft water (low mineral content), or acidic water.

The only way to know the amount of lead in your household water is to have your water tested. Many certified labs in Washington perform these tests for $20 to $40 per test. Lab staff can answer questions and tell you how to collect water samples. For the name of a certified drinking water laboratory near you, call the Office of Drinking Water.

Reducing Lead Exposure

Ways to reduce lead in home drinking water:

- If water in a particular faucet is not used for six hours or longer, "flush" the pipes by running cold water through it until the water is noticeably colder—about one minute. The more time water sits in your home's pipes, the more lead and other dissolved metals the water may contain.
- Use only cold water for drinking, cooking, and making baby formula. Hot water may contain higher levels of lead.
- Clean the screens and aerators in faucets frequently to remove captured lead particles.
- If building or remodeling, only use "lead free" piping and materials for plumbing.

Regulation Requirements

Drinking water regulations require public water systems to:

- Collect samples from some residential customers.
- Treat the water when more than 10 percent of samples exceed the action level (0.015 parts per million).
- Provide annual public education to all consumers as part of the annual Consumer Confidence Report.

Contacting Us

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