

Lead in Drinking Water

Have You Got Lead Pipes?

Some drinking water can contain lead in undesirable amounts. This leaflet explains how you can find out whether that is so in your home and what you can do about it.

Is Lead Harmful?

Lead is commonly found in the environment. It comes from a variety of sources including vehicle exhausts and old paint work and may be present in air, food, soil or water.

Lead can build up in the body and it can be harmful. It is sensible to avoid excessive exposure from any source.

The Government has taken action to reduce exposure to lead from petrol, paint and drinking water.

Nevertheless some infants and children may still be at risk. Studies have shown that lead can have a small effect on the mental development of children. It may also be a factor in behavioural problems.

It is best therefore to keep lead levels in water as low as possible.

How Does Lead Get Into Drinking Water?

Water does not contain lead when it leaves the treatment works.

For a long time, generally up to 1970, lead was used for some water pipes. Part or all of the service pipe connecting the water main in the street to your kitchen tap may be made of lead.

Some types of water, particularly soft water from upland areas, can pick up lead from pipes. Water is treated to reduce this where needed. In addition, deposits containing lead can build up in pipes and may occasionally be dislodged.

For these reasons, the amount of lead in drinking water can sometimes be above the standard.

How Do I Know If There Are Lead Pipes In My Home?

If your home has been modernised since 1970 and all of its pipework replaced from the water company's stop valve outside your home to the kitchen tap, there should be no lead pipe on your property.

If your home was built:

before 1970 it may have lead pipes

after 1970 it is unlikely to have lead pipes

If you are unsure, you can make a simple check:

Inside your home -

Look in or behind the cupboards in your kitchen. You may also need to look in other places, e.g. the cupboard under the stairs. Find the pipe leading to the kitchen tap. Check if it is lead along as much of its length as possible. Unpainted lead pipes are dull grey. They are also soft. If you scrape the surface gently with a knife, you will see the shiny, silver-coloured metal beneath.

Outside your home -

Open the flap of the stop valve outside your property. Examine the pipe leading from the stop valve to the property. If you can, scrape its surface gently with a knife. It may not be possible to do this in some cases as access may be difficult.

Other pipe materials in common use are:

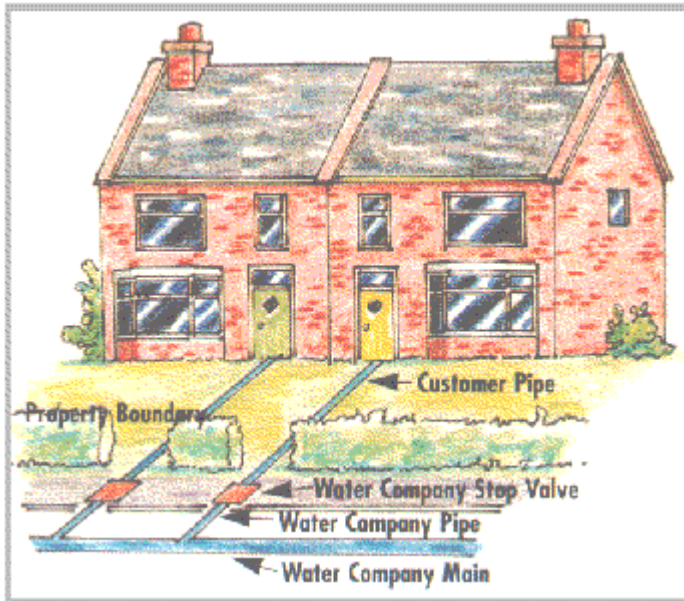
copper - bright, hard and dull brown

iron - dark, very hard and may be rusty

plastic - may be grey, black or blue.

If in doubt, ask your water company or local authority for advice.

Who Is Responsible For The Pipework?



The part of the service pipe which links the water main in the street to the stop valve outside your property belongs to the water company.

The part of the service pipe leading from the stop valve outside your property to the point where it enters your home is your responsibility if you are the owner, otherwise it is your landlord's.

All the plumbing inside your home to the kitchen tap is your responsibility or your landlord's.

How Can I Find Out If There Is Lead In My Drinking Water?

If your home has lead pipes, your drinking water may sometimes contain high levels of lead. Your water company will tell you how likely this is. It regularly takes samples of the water supplied to individual properties in your area and tests them for lead. It will take a sample from your home if necessary, and will tell you the results.

What Can I Do To Reduce Lead Levels?

If lead pipes are causing high lead levels in your drinking water, you can take some simple short-term precautions:

Do not drink water that has been standing in the pipes for long periods, for example, overnight, or if no one has been in for several hours.

In these circumstances, draw off a washing-up bowlful of water from the kitchen tap to clear the water which has been standing in the pipes. This need not be wasted but can be used on the garden or for something other than drinking or cooking. If the length of lead pipes exceeds 40 metres, more than a bowlful of water will need to be drawn off.

You can then use the water from the kitchen tap as usual.

If you have any lead pipework between the stop valve outside your home and your kitchen tap, the best solution is to replace it with copper or plastic pipework.

If you do that, you can ask your water company to replace its part of the service pipe between the water main in the street and the stop valve. It can be required to do this free of charge.

Make sure that removing lead water pipes does not reduce electrical safety by removing earthing. Ask your electricity supplier if in doubt.

Grants are available for renovation and minor works for households with low income. Information about this may be obtained from your local authority.

Other Useful Hints

Whether or not there is lead plumbing in your home:

- for drinking and cooking, always use the water from the cold water tap in the kitchen.**
- avoid drinking water from bathroom taps.**

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