

Lead in tap water

Water quality factsheet 7



There is little or no lead in water as it leaves our treatment works but small quantities can be found in tap water in older houses where lead pipes are used to connect the property to the mains.

There may also be lead pipework or tank linings inside these properties. Where lead is found in tap water, it invariably comes from lead solder or old lead pipework. This factsheet looks at the issue of lead pipes and what you can do about it.

We take water quality seriously at South West Water. This is one of a series of factsheets about water quality – you can find more factsheets at southwestwater.co.uk

What do the regulations say about lead in drinking water?

The regulatory maximum for lead in water is 25 micrograms of lead per litre of water. This is a tiny amount and will be further reduced to 10 micrograms per litre in 2013 to ensure that we are exposed to as little lead as possible during our lifetimes.

How does lead get into water?

When water leaves our treatment works, it contains no, or very little, lead.

Water from some areas, such as water from upland areas where the water is particularly soft, has a greater potential to pick up lead that it comes into contact with. In recent years, we have taken measures to treat this water so that it's less likely to pick up lead.

However, lead can still get into water if the water passes through old lead pipes or fittings in your home or workplace.

How do I tell if my pipes are made of lead?

Until 1970, lead was often used in domestic plumbing. If your house was built or your pipework fully replaced after 1970, it's unlikely that you have any lead pipes.

To check, find the pipe entering your home and trace it to your kitchen tap. Try to locate as much of the pipework as possible.

Unpainted lead pipes are soft and dull grey in colour but, if you scrape the surface gently, the lead pipes will appear shiny and silver underneath the surface.

Identifying what your pipes are made of

Material	Appearance	Is it suitable?
Lead	Dull grey on the outside. Easily scratched to reveal a shiny silver colour. Dull sound when tapped.	No
Copper	Dull brown on the outside. Hard. Bright copper when scratched. Ringing sound when tapped with a coin.	Yes
Iron	Dark grey or brown and probably rusty. Very hard and not easily scratched. Ringing sound when tapped with a coin.	Yes
Plastic	May be grey blue or black.	Yes

If you are not sure what some of the pipework in your property is made of, you should ask your plumber to check.

Can I safely drink water that contains lead?

No. Lead can build up in the body over time and cause serious health problems, so it's important that you minimise your exposure to lead. This is particularly important for pregnant women and children.

If you find that you have lead pipes or fittings, you can reduce the amount of lead you are exposed to in your water by letting the water run for a while before you use it for drinking – especially if the water has been sitting in your system for several hours or longer.

To avoid wasting the water you run, you could use it for watering plants.

Can I wash using water that contains lead?

Yes. You can safely use water that contains lead for washing and bathing.

How can I eliminate lead from my water?

To eliminate lead from your drinking water, you need to replace any lead pipes, lead solder joints or lead fittings. You should speak to your plumber about the best way to do this. You're responsible for the pipework in your property and the service pipe connecting it to the main supply (this is usually to the boundary of your property), as in the diagram on the next page.

Lead and our health

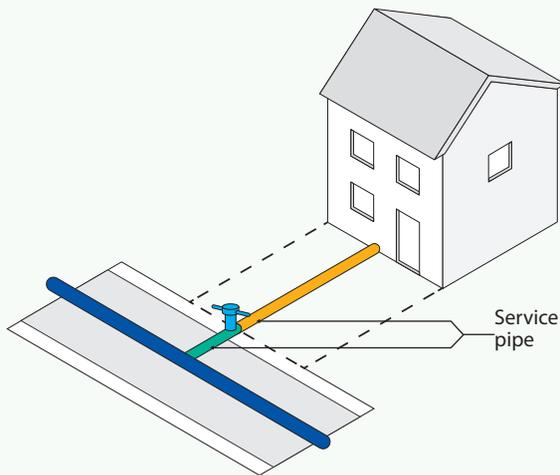
Lead can gradually accumulate in the body over time, causing a variety of serious health problems.

It can interfere with the development of the nervous system, and can cause learning and behaviour disorders with children.

In the past, lead was commonly used in petrol and paint and had many other uses too, including for pipes and plumbing fittings.

As medicine began to understand the damage caused by lead, its use has been phased out. However, past use means that it can still be found in our homes and workplaces.

Typical pipe responsibilities



-  Communication pipe (our responsibility)
-  Supply pipe (homeowner's responsibility)
-  Stop tap or stop tap and water meter (our responsibility)
-  Premises boundary

The service pipe

Properties are connected to our water mains by a service pipe. The ownership of the service pipe is divided into two parts, the communication pipe and the supply pipe, as indicated in the diagram on the left.

The communication pipe

This part of the water service pipe is South West Water's responsibility and runs from our water main to the boundary of the street in which a water main is laid. We are responsible for looking after and maintaining this.

The supply pipe

This part of the water service pipe is the homeowner's responsibility. It extends from the boundary of the street in which a water main is laid and connects with the internal stop tap usually found under the kitchen sink.

Is lead solder still used?

Using lead solder in pipework containing drinking water is now banned in England and Wales. However, lead solder can still be safely used for other plumbing work such as closed-circuit central heating systems.

Questions about your water supply

If you have any questions about lead in water, or about anything else to do with your water supply, please call us on 0800 169 1144 (minicom 0800 169 9965).

We're open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

