

Frequently Asked Questions about Lead in Water from Pipes and Plumbing

What is lead?

Lead is a common naturally occurring metallic element that can be found in air, soil, and water. It is also a powerful toxin that is harmful to human health. Lead was commonly used in gasoline and paint until the 1970s and is still sometimes found in products such as ceramics, batteries, ammunition, and cosmetics. Lead was used for centuries in plumbing because of its pliability and resistance to leaks; in fact, lead's chemical symbol, Pb, is derived from the Latin word for plumbing. In 1986, U.S. Congress amended the Safe Drinking Water Act to prohibit the use of pipes, solder or flux that were not "lead free." At the time "lead free" was defined as solder and flux with no more than .2% lead and pipes with no more than 8%. In 2014, the maximum allowable lead content was reduced from not more than 8% to not more than a weighted average of 0.25% of the wetted surface of pipes, pipe fittings, plumbing fittings, and fixtures.

Why is lead a health risk?

Lead is a toxic metal that can cause immediate health effects at high doses and long-term health effects if it builds up in the body over many years. Lead can cause brain and kidney damage in addition to effects on the blood and vitamin D metabolism. Pregnant women and young children are particularly vulnerable because the physical and behavioral effects of lead occur at lower exposure levels in children than in adults. In children, low levels of exposure have been linked to central and peripheral nervous system damage, learning disabilities, shorter stature, impaired hearing, and impaired formation and function of blood cells. While people are more commonly exposed to lead through paint, soil and dust, U.S. EPA estimates infants who consume mostly mixed formula can receive 40 percent to 60 percent of their exposure to lead from drinking water.

How do I know whether my drinking water contains lead?

Because it is colorless and tasteless, lead is not readily apparent in water. In fact, the only way to know for certain whether your drinking water contains lead is to have your water tested by a certified laboratory. You can call Reading Area Water Authority at 610-406-6300 to discuss your property and get testing information.

How does lead get into drinking water?

Lead is almost never present when water flows from the treatment facility, nor is it present in the water mains running beneath the streets. However, in some older homes lead may be present in the pipe connecting the home to the water system – known as a service line – or in the home plumbing. Lead in service pipes, plumbing or fixtures can dissolve, or particles can break off into water and end up at the tap.

How much lead in water is too much?

Lead can be harmful even at very low levels and can accumulate in our bodies over time, so wherever possible steps should be taken to reduce or eliminate your household's exposure. While risks vary based on individual circumstances and the amount of water consumed, no concentration of lead is considered "safe." Households with pregnant women, infants, or young children are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of lead at low levels.

What can I do to reduce or eliminate lead from my drinking water?

The best way to remove risks of lead in water is to completely replace all sources of lead. But there are also steps you can take right away to reduce lead levels in your water.

1. *Run the Tap Before Use* – Lead levels are likely at their highest when water has been sitting in the pipe for several hours. Clear this water from your pipes by running the cold water for several minutes. This allows you to draw fresh water from the main. You can use this water on house plants or to flush toilets.
2. *Clean Aerators* – Aerators are small attachments at the tips of faucets which regulate the flow of water. They can accumulate small particles of lead in their screens. It's a good idea to remove your aerators at least monthly and clean them out.
3. *Use Cold Water for Cooking and Drinking* – Always cook and prepare baby formula with cold water, because hot water dissolves lead more quickly, resulting in higher levels in water.
4. *Filter the Water* – Many home water filters are effective at removing lead. If you purchase a filter, make sure it is certified for lead removal and that you maintain it properly. Find out more on filter certification at www.nsf.org.

Are there special steps I should take to protect my developing baby, infant or young children?

Households with pregnant women, infants or young children should be especially aware of the potential for lead exposure through drinking water. If you suspect there may be lead in

your home plumbing, consider having your water tested at a certified laboratory. If lead is detected, consider purchasing a filter certified for lead removal or using an alternate source of water until the problem is corrected. Babies and young children are most vulnerable to the harmful effects of lead at low levels. U.S. EPA estimates infants who consume mostly mixed formula can receive 40 percent to 60 percent of their exposure to lead from drinking water.

Is it safe to shower in water that contains lead?

Because lead is not absorbed through the skin, bathing or showering in water containing lead is not considered a health risk.

What does RAWA do to protect my household from lead?

In order to prevent lead from dissolving into water from lead service lines or home plumbing, RAWA adjusts the water's chemistry at the treatment plant. This process is known as corrosion control. We sample water at homes considered to be high risk in order to ensure our corrosion control remains effective. Although corrosion control can reduce risks, the best way to assure your home is safe from lead exposure through water is to remove the potential sources of lead.

How do I know if my home has a lead service line or lead plumbing?

You can hire a certified plumber or contact your utility to inspect both your service line and other materials in contact with your drinking water. Here in Reading, lead service lines are mostly in homes constructed before 1960.

You may be able to determine on your own if your service line is made of lead. Service lines typically enter the home in the basement or crawl space. If the pipe is lead, it will have a dull finish that shines brightly when scratched with a key or coin. Using a magnet can also help you identify a lead pipe, because even a strong magnet will not cling to lead.

Who owns the lead service line?

In Reading, lead service lines are owned by RAWA up to the customer's curb, and the rest of the line is owned by the property owner. RAWA is replacing any known lead pipes in the distribution area. If you suspect a lead line service coming into your home, please contact RAWA at 610-406-6300 to have this inspected and find out what programs are available for homeowners that need to replace a lead service.

I'm in a new house. Am I at risk?

Very few homes constructed after 1960 have lead service lines, and those built after 1986 were required to use plumbing materials with substantially reduced lead content. If you are concerned, consider having your water tested by a certified laboratory, or contact your utility.

Do all home filters and other water treatment devices remove lead?

No. If you purchase a water filter or home treatment device, make sure it is independently certified for lead removal and that you maintain it properly. Find out more on filter certification at www.nsf.org.

Can my pets drink water with lead?

Lead can impact animals the same way it does humans. Because domestic animals consume a relatively high volume of water relative to their body weight, pet owners with lead in their home plumbing may want to take precautions.

Is water the only source of lead in homes and businesses?

No. In fact, lead in drinking water generally represents only about 20% of total exposure, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. However, drinking water can account for more than half of lead exposure in children because of their lower body weight. Additionally, because no level of lead is considered safe, completely eliminating potential sources of lead is strongly advised.