Lead in Household Plumbing

Frequently Asked Questions

Why is there a public information campaign about lead?
Lead is not found at elevated levels in New York City's reservoirs or distribution system. Sometimes elevated lead levels are found in tap water samples from corrosion of lead-containing plumbing. The City monitors a selection of homes that have lead service lines (homes built before 1961 may have lead service lines), or internal fixtures and plumbing that contain lead, or that have internal plumbing joined by lead solder (plumbing installed before 1987 may contain lead solder).

The EPA action level for lead in drinking water is 15 parts per billion (ppb). DEP is required to notify the public when test results show more than 10% of the homes tested have levels of lead above the 15 ppb action level.

What is the City doing about the elevated lead levels in household tap water?
DEP has an active program to reduce the amount of lead that dissolves into tap water, especially in homes with lead service lines or lead soldering in pipes. DEP carefully and continuously monitors and adjusts pH levels of water to a specific range that reduces the corrosiveness of the water. DEP also adds phosphoric acid—a common food preservative—to create a protective film on pipes that reduces the release of metals, such as lead, from household plumbing. Since these treatments were started, the levels of lead in tap water have been going down.

How does lead get into tap water?
New York City water is virtually lead-free when it is delivered from the city's upstate reservoir systems. Lead from solder, fixtures, and pipes found in the plumbing of some older buildings and homes can get into water. Lead levels can increase when water sits in pipes and faucets for several hours when no one is using water.

Is lead still used in plumbing?
Lead service lines have not been installed in New York City since 1961, and the use of lead solder in plumbing systems was banned in 1987.

Do City-owned buildings, like schools, have lead service lines?
No. Lead service lines in all City-owned buildings known to have lead service lines, including public schools, were replaced over the past decade.

What can I do reduce the potential for exposure to lead from the tap?
Run your faucet for at least 30 seconds, until the water gets noticeably colder, before using for drinking, cooking or making baby formula. Always use cold water for cooking, drinking, and making baby formula and baby cereal. Never use hot tap water for consumption because lead dissolves more easily in hot water.

Does boiling water remove lead?
No. Boiling water does not remove lead. Boiling water can actually concentrate lead levels so always use cold water for drinking and cooking, including for making baby formula or cereal.

Will my filter remove lead?
Some faucet and pitcher filters can remove lead from tap water. If you use a filter, be sure to get one that is tested and certified by an independent third party in accordance with the standards developed by the National Sanitation Foundation, also known as NSF International. Be sure to maintain and replace a filter device in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions to protect water quality. Remember, home treatment devices require periodic maintenance and replacement and can only treat the water that flows from the faucet(s) to which it is connected. Be sure to check the actual performance of a specific home treatment device before and after installing the unit. Read the package to be sure the treatment device is approved to reduce lead or contact NSF International at 800-NSF-8010 or www.nsf.org for information on performance standards for home treatment devices.

Will running the tap increase my water bill?
Running tap water is a simple and inexpensive measure you can take to protect your family's health. It usually uses less than one or two gallons of water and costs approximately $1 per month. To help reduce these costs, you can also fill a couple of bottles for drinking water after running the tap the first time. Another way to conserve water is to use the first run of water for plants, household cleaning or for other purposes that do not involve cooking and drinking.

Can I get my water tested for lead?
Yes. In the event that someone is still concerned after following all of these safety precautions, DEP offers a free lead testing kit. Call 311 to request that one be sent to you.

My neighbors got their water tested and found lead. Is my water safe/are my test results accurate?
Each home should be tested separately for lead. Lead usually gets into tap water through contact with plumbing materials such as lead pipes or lead solder, or faucets, valves, and fixtures made of brass. (Brass contains some lead). Since each home has different plumbing pipes and materials, test results are likely to be different for each home.

Is there anything else I can do about lead in water?
Individual property owners have the option to replace pipes and fixtures containing lead with lead-free pipes and fixtures. In addition, sometimes lead and sediment can build up on the individual screens at your faucets. To clean them, take off the faucet strainers from all taps and run the water for 3 to 5 minutes. Thereafter, periodically remove the strainers and flush out any debris that has accumulated.

If a product is labeled lead free, does that mean it is safe?
Even new faucets, fittings, and valves, including those advertised as "lead-free," may contribute lead to drinking water. Under New York State law plumbing fixtures, such as faucets, with up to 8 percent lead can be labeled as "lead free." Consumers should be aware of this when choosing fixtures and take appropriate precautions.

What is lead poisoning?
Lead poisoning is a preventable health problem. Young children and pregnant women are at greatest risk. Lead poisoning can cause learning and behavior problems and delayed growth and development in children. In New York City, lead paint in homes, not lead in water, is the most common cause of lead poisoning in children. Children can swallow lead dust from peeling lead paint when they put their hands and toys in their mouths. Children can also be exposed to lead in household dust, soil, water and some imported consumer products like clay pottery, cosmetics, food, herbal remedies and toys. Reducing exposure to lead from all sources is the best way to protect children from lead poisoning. During the four-month sampling period (June – September 2010) when lead in water levels were slightly elevated, there was a 2.4% decline in the number of young children newly identified with elevated blood lead levels as compared with the same period in 2009. For more information on lead poisoning, visit www.nyc.gov/health.

How can I protect my child from lead poisoning?

- Remind your doctor to test your child for lead poisoning at ages 1 and 2 as required by law.
- Talk to your doctor about testing older children and pregnant women if they are at risk of lead exposure.
- Tell your landlord if you have peeling paint in your home. Your landlord must inspect and safely repair peeling paint if a young child lives in your home. Call 311 if your landlord doesn't fix peeling paint safely.
- Keep children away from peeling or damaged paint and home repairs that disturb lead paint.
- Clean floors and windowsills with wet mops and wet cloths.
- Wash toys and children's hands often, especially before they eat.
- Use cold tap water for making baby formula, drinking and cooking. Before using, always let the water run at least 30 seconds, until the water is noticeably colder.
- Do not use items that may contain lead, such as imported pottery, cosmetics and herbal remedies.
- Call 311 for more information about lead poisoning and how to get your child tested for lead poisoning.

Where can I get more information on lead?
For more information, visit www.epa.gov/lead or call EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791.