



Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies

1620 I Street, NW, Suite 500

Washington, DC 20006

202-331-2820 fax 785-1845

www.amwa.net

Facts on Lead in Drinking Water

What are the major sources of lead exposure for children?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that the major source of lead exposure for children in the United States is lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust found in deteriorating buildings.

Is there a national problem with lead in drinking water?

So far there does not appear to be a national problem with lead in drinking water, but U.S. EPA is looking into this. U.S. EPA's Lead and Copper Rule seems to be working as intended. Where there is a compliance problem, U.S. EPA or a State may take action to correct the situation.

If there is lead in my drinking water, where does it come from?

Lead in drinking water rarely comes from the water treatment plant or from water mains. Lead comes from faucets, plumbing fixtures and lead solder within the home and from lead service lines, if they are present. Lead is seldom found in natural sources of drinking water.

Why is there lead in my faucets and fixtures?

In 1986, Congress amended the Safe Drinking Water Act to allow faucets and other plumbing fixtures to contain up to 8% lead. Congress defined such fixtures as "lead-free."

What is a lead service line?

Service lines run from the water main under the street to the customer's home. Therefore part of the line is on public property and the remainder is on the customer's property. Some service lines are made of lead. Where lead service lines are still in use, they typically serve older homes.

For a water system to replace the lead service line on the homeowner's property, the homeowner must grant his or her permission, and the utility and the homeowner must determine how to pay for the replacement, which can typically cost between \$800 and \$1,600.

How does the U.S. EPA's Lead and Copper Rule protect public health?

The rule protects public health by requiring water systems to control corrosion. This has been determined to be the most effective way for water systems to minimize the lead that leaches from homeowners' plumbing fixtures and lead service lines. Also under the rule, water systems educate the public about lead exposure and remove lead service lines if the rule's 15 parts per billion Action Level is exceeded in 10% of a sample set of homes.

Why didn't U.S. EPA issue a maximum contaminant level at homeowners' taps?

U.S. EPA generally issues maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) to govern the quality of drinking water as it leaves the water treatment plant because most contaminants are found in source (untreated) water. In 1991, EPA rejected setting an MCL at the tap for lead because "much of the lead and copper-bearing plumbing materials is privately owned and outside the public water system's control." Plumbing fixtures legally contain up to 8% lead. An MCL would make water systems responsible for the leaching from these home fixtures.

What happens if a water system exceeds the 15 ppb Action Level?

According to U.S. EPA, the 15 ppb Action Level is used to indicate whether corrosion control efforts are effective and to measure progress in reducing lead levels. All large water systems are required to maintain corrosion control. If a large water system detects lead above 15 ppb in the tap water in more than 10% of a sample set of homes, then the water system (1) further informs the public about the health effects so that consumers can make decisions about the sources of lead in their homes and (2) begins removing lead service lines at the rate of 7% per year until lead samples drop below 15 ppb.

In smaller water systems, the detection of lead at 15 ppb can trigger a corrosion control program to reduce the amount of lead leaching from service lines and homeowners' plumbing.

What do water systems do?

Water systems do their part by controlling corrosion and educating the public on the dangers of lead to help consumers make informed decisions. In large, older cities, most water systems that serve homes likely to experience high lead levels have programs to remove lead service lines. However, there are often legal and financial hurdles to remove lead service lines on private property.

What can consumers do?

Homeowners who suspect they may have lead service lines should contact their local water system.

To reduce exposure from lead service lines or plumbing fixtures, consider using an in-home filter or follow the CDC's advice on running taps on COLD before drinking. Homeowners who install filters must use filters that are certified to remove lead. Also, read the filter's instructions on care and use. Homeowners should also install plumbing fixtures containing no lead. Information on plumbing fixtures and in-home filters is provided by the National Sanitation Foundation at 1-800-NSF-MARK or www.nsf.org.

Never boil water to remove lead, because this concentrates the lead as water evaporates.

What can Congress do?

Congress currently defines "lead-free" as 8% lead content. Instead, Congress should make illegal the manufacture of faucets and fixtures contributing to lead exposure. This would reduce the amount of lead in drinking water. Further, Congress should create incentives for homeowners to replace lead service lines on private property and replace plumbing fixtures containing lead.

More Information and Tips

The Centers for Disease Control has a very informative question and answer page about lead and drinking water: www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/spotLights/leadinwater.htm.

The U.S. EPA operates a National Lead Information Center at 1-800-424-Lead. There is also a useful website at www.epa.gov/lead.