

Fact Sheet

November 2010

Lead in Drinking Water

What is lead and how does it get into my drinking water?

Lead is a soft metal that was used to make many products, including water pipes. One of the main ways that lead gets into your drinking water is when the water pipe that goes to your home from the underground watermain is made of lead. This pipe is often referred to as a lead service line. If you live in a house built before the mid-1950s, your service pipe could be made of lead. Lead service pipes were not used for large buildings, so if you live in an apartment building, your pipes will not be lead.

There are two parts to your water service pipe - the city owned portion and the pipe running from your property into your home, which is your responsibility. The City can only make changes to the part of the system that it owns.

Is lead harmful to my health?

Lead can affect how the brain and nervous system grows and has the most impact on the fetus, infants and children under six years old. Infants who are fed formula made with tap water from lead service pipes could be getting the highest amount of lead from drinking water because this is their main source of food. If a young child has too much lead in the body, it can lead to a shortened attention span, intellectual and behavioural problems.

How can I tell if I have a lead water service pipe?

1. Find out if you live in a house built before the mid-1950s. If so, it likely has a lead service pipe. If you own your house, check the purchase papers. If you rent, ask the owner.
2. If possible, look at the pipe that goes into your water meter. If it is grey, scratches easily and does not sound hollow when you tap it, it may be lead.

Actions for people who live in houses built before the mid-1950s:

1. **If you are pregnant and/or have a child under six years old:** Install an end-of-tap water filter. Look for filters certified by the National Sanitation Foundation that have "NSF-53 for lead removal/reduction" on the label. For information on good filters, call 1-800-673-8010 or visit the NSF web site at www.nsf.org.

If you are feeding your baby **formula**, begin with **cold filtered** tap water, boil it, and then let it cool. Use within 30 minutes. Until you have a filter, consider using bottled water for drinking and making baby formula. You can also consider using ready-to-feed formula.

2. Breastfeed your baby. Breast milk is healthy and the amount of lead in breast milk is much lower than in tap water.

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3. Every time your water has not been used for more than a few hours, run the water until it is very cold, and then let it run for at least 1 minute. This is called ‘flushing’ the pipes.
4. Use cold water for cooking and drinking, even after flushing the pipes. Lead in pipes moves more readily into hot water than into cold water, so cold water is less likely to be contaminated.
5. Replace your side of the lead service pipe. Toronto Public Health strongly recommends replacing *both* portions of the lead service pipe – the City owned portion, and your portion. If you have had one or both sides of your lead service pipe replaced, **be sure to read the important health information** that was distributed to your household. This information is also available at: www.toronto.ca/health/lead/pdf/door_hanger.pdf

General Tips for Reducing Exposure to Lead:

1. If your house or apartment is built after the mid-1950s, but before 1989, flush your pipes regularly. Use cold water for cooking and drinking to reduce the small amounts of lead that might be in your water from lead solder (or seams) that might be in your plumbing. This is all you need to do, even if you are pregnant, breastfeeding, have a child under six years old or are feeding your baby formula made with tap water.
2. If you live in an older home, don’t sand or scrape the paint because it may contain lead. Paint used in homes built before 1980 can contain lead. This lead can get into your house dust so be sure to dust regularly with a wet mop or cloth.
3. Children should wash their hands often, especially before eating and at bedtime, to remove any lead dust on their hands.
4. Don’t wear your outdoor shoes inside the house. The dirt on the bottom of your shoes can contain lead or other pollutants.

To learn more about lead paint and dust, see Toronto Public Health’s “Hidden Exposures” fact sheets at: www.toronto.ca/health/hphe/children.htm. To learn more about the City’s plans to get the lead out of drinking water, visit www.toronto.ca/water.