



Frequently Asked Questions about Lead in Drinking Water

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1. I'm on public water; doesn't my water supplier already test my water for lead?

In New Hampshire, NHDES oversees public water systems to ensure the water they provide is tested and safe per the requirements of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), which includes the Lead and Copper Rule (LCR), a regulation passed in 1991 to control lead and copper in drinking water. Under the LCR, community and non-transient, non-community public water systems* are required to test water for lead and copper at a set number of service connections (depending on the number of customers served) that are at a higher risk for lead in tap water due to their plumbing characteristics. Water suppliers are not required to test the tap water of every customer.

All public water system testing results, including those for lead, are available on NHDES' website. Water suppliers also publish a summary of their results annually as part of their Water Quality Report (sometimes called a Consumer Confidence Report). Contact your water supplier to obtain a copy of their annual Water Quality Report.

**Community (C) water systems supply water to the same people year-round; town water systems are an example of C systems. Non-transient, non-community (NTNC) water systems serve 25 or more people for at least six months per year; schools and businesses with their own water source are examples of NTNC systems. In New Hampshire, there are approximately 1,200 C and NTNC water systems.*

2. How does lead get into tap water?

Lead rarely occurs naturally in New Hampshire's drinking water sources, namely groundwater and surface water. In most cases, the pipes carrying water in the street also do not add lead to the water. Lead can enter, or "leach," into water from a short section of pipe called a "service line" that connects an individual building to the water main in the street if the pipe is made of lead. In some cases, small sections of pipe called "goosenecks," used to connect the service line to the water main, may also have been made of lead. Lead can also leach into tap water from interior pipes, solder or plumbing fixtures that contain lead.

3. Do I need to be worried about lead in my tap water?

Maybe. Many water systems add a compound to water that makes it less corrosive or that forms a protective coating inside pipes to reduce the chances of it wearing away, or “corroding,” plumbing materials that may contain lead within buildings served by the water system. This is a water treatment process called “corrosion control.” Some buildings, however, are more at risk for having lead in tap water due to characteristics of the building’s plumbing. The following factors increase the chances of there being a problem with lead in tap water:

- Lead service line or lead gooseneck.
- Lead plumbing. Lead pipes are dull gray in color, are soft enough to be easily scratched with a house key, and are not magnetic (galvanized steel pipes are dull when scraped and a magnet will stick to them.)
- Copper pipes connected with lead solder installed prior to 1987. Allowable lead content in solder was reduced from 50% to 0.2% in 1986.
- Faucets or brass fittings that contain some lead. The requirement for lead-free fixtures and fittings has only been in place in the United States since January 4, 2014. Fixtures purchased before this date may contain up to 8% lead content.

If you have questions or concerns about your service connection, contact your water supplier. If you have questions or concerns about your plumbing, contact a New Hampshire-licensed plumber.

4. I get my water from a well; do I need to be worried about lead in my tap water?

Maybe. Depending on its chemistry, well water can cause lead to leach from interior pipes, solder or plumbing fixtures that contain lead. You do not need to worry about lead service lines or lead goosenecks.

5. How do I know if there’s lead in my tap water?

The only way to know if there’s lead in your tap water is to have your water tested by an accredited laboratory. You cannot see, taste or smell lead in water. To assess lead levels in home tap water, NHDES recommends collecting a 1-liter water sample.

6. I had my tap water tested and there's lead in it.

How much lead is too much and what are the health concerns?

Public water systems are required to comply with an “action level” of 0.015 milligrams per liter (mg/l) at customer taps. This level is not based on health risks, but rather is meant to inform water systems about their water treatment processes. This level is currently under review by EPA.

Babies, children under the age of 6, and pregnant or breastfeeding women are especially vulnerable to the effects of lead exposure. If any lead is present in your water, use water from a source known to be lead-free (such as bottled water) for cooking and drinking purposes, and especially for making baby food and formula. Babies and children who are exposed to lead could experience long-term problems with physical and mental growth and development, including slowed body growth, kidney problems, hearing problems, seizures, brain damage, lower IQ level, trouble learning, reduced attention span and behavior problems. Lead exposure can also seriously harm unborn babies, causing premature birth, lower birth weight and delayed mental and physical development.

Adults who are exposed to lead may be at higher risk for cancer, stroke and high blood pressure, and could develop nervous system problems, kidney problems, anemia and decreased sperm production in men.

How can I reduce my exposure to lead in tap water?

There are several easy things you can do to reduce your exposure to lead in drinking water. These steps are particularly important if babies, children under the age of 6, or pregnant or breastfeeding women use the water.

- **Flush your plumbing before using the water for drinking and cooking.** In most cases, you can reduce the level of lead in water you use for drinking and cooking by clearing the water from, or “flushing,” the pipes before using it. The routine of letting the water run to get the lead out should be done each morning and if the water has not been used for more than six hours – for example, overnight or during the day when you have been out of the house. To “flush the tap,” turn on the cold water faucet and let the water run for at least 15 seconds. If you need hot water for drinking or cooking, take water from the cold water tap and heat it. Other household water uses, such as showering or toilet flushing, will also help clear water from your plumbing. Keep in mind you will still need to run individual faucets for a short time before using them for cooking and drinking water. You may want to keep a container of water in your refrigerator, so the water does not have to be flushed every time you need it.
- **Use only cold water for drinking and cooking.** Use only water from the cold-water tap for drinking, cooking, and especially for making baby food and formula. Water from the hot-water tap can dissolve lead more easily and is likely to contain higher levels of lead. **Boiling the water will not reduce the amount of lead in it.** You can also consider purchasing bottled water from a source known to be lead-free for cooking and drinking purposes.
- **Inspect your faucet aerator.** The aerator on the end of your faucet is a screen that can catch debris, including particles of lead. It is recommended you periodically remove the aerator and rinse out any debris.
- **Use a device that filters the lead out of the water.** Home water filtration systems or water filtering pitchers (called Pour Through devices by NSF) can reduce or completely remove lead. Look for products certified by NSF/ANSI under Standard 53 for removal of lead and follow any manufacturer’s guidelines on installation and maintenance of the product. Devices that are not certified to remove lead will not work.
- **Use a device that treats the water so it doesn’t corrode plumbing.** Lead levels may be high in your water because of how acidic your water is. This is generally more of a concern for people who get their water from a private well. Lead and other metals can leach from pipes and plumbing fixtures when water is acidic. If you haven’t already done so, you should also test the pH of your water, which will tell you if your water is acidic. If your water is acidic (pH is less than 7.0), a whole house acid neutralizer system, such as a calcite filter, can be used to increase the pH and make the water less acidic.
- **Remove the source of lead by replacing your lead service line or interior plumbing.** Although the risks associated with lead in tap water can be reduced by taking the above steps, the best protection is to remove the source of lead by replacing your lead or galvanized iron pipes and fittings and lead-soldered pipes, and brass or chrome fixtures with other approved materials, such as plastic and lead content certified products.