Milwaukee Water Works

Think Health Act Now! CITY OF MILWAUKEE HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Lead Awareness and Drinking Water Safety

Lead is not found in Milwaukee's source water or public water system. However, lead can enter water as the result of the wearing away of materials containing lead in building fixtures, internal plumbing, or in the service line that brings water to your home. When water stands for several hours or more in fixtures or pipes that contain lead, the lead may leach into the water. It is also possible that physical disturbance of the piping may release lead into the water.

Since 1996, Milwaukee Water Works has safely treated its water with ortho-phosphate to reduce the risk of lead leaching from plumbing materials into water. This compound forms a protective coating inside pipes and is considered to be the best practice for the control of lead in drinking water. However, some homes are more at risk for lead in drinking water due to characteristics of the plumbing at the individual residence.

Which homes are most at risk of having lead in drinking water?

- Homes with lead household plumbing. A licensed plumber can determine if your household plumbing may be made of lead. Lead pipes are dull gray in color and are soft enough to be easily scratched with a house key.
- Homes with copper pipe and lead solder installed between 1982 and 1987. Lead-based solder was banned for use after this time.
- Homes with faucets or fittings of brass which contain some lead. Since January 1, 2014, only lead-free fixtures and fittings are allowed to be installed or used to repair drinking water plumbing. Plumbing and fixtures installed before these dates or purchased from sources outside of the United States may contain lead.
- Homes where the service line connecting the water main in the street to the building is made of lead. Approximately 70,000 properties in the Milwaukee Water Works service area constructed before 1947 are known to have lead service lines. An additional 10,000 constructed between 1948 and 1951 likely have lead service lines. Buildings constructed after 1951 have service lines made of copper.

Easy steps to reduce the risk of lead in your drinking water

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

1. Flush your plumbing. Before using tap water for drinking or cooking, flush your plumbing by running the kitchen faucet (or any other tap you take drinking or cooking water from) on cold for a minimum of 3 minutes, and longer if necessary, until the water stream is noticeably colder. This is especially important if your water has been sitting in your pipes for more than six hours.

Showering, doing laundry and flushing the toilet all help clear water from the pipes. Bathing, showering, and doing laundry in water from lead services lines or lead plumbing is safe. To conserve water, you can also reserve the flushed water and use for watering household plants or outdoor plants.

You may also want to consider filling a clean container(s) with water from the flushed tap, and reserving this water for drinking, cooking, or other consumption.

2. Use only cold water for cooking and drinking. Water from the hot water tap can dissolve lead more easily than cold water. Boiling water will not reduce the amount of lead in your drinking or cooking water. In fact, boiling can concentrate the lead in water. You can also consider purchasing bottled water from a known lead-free source for drinking and cooking.

3. 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 to periodically remove the aerator and rinse out any debris.

4. Purchase a home filtration system. Home drinking water filtration systems or water filtering pitchers can reduce or eliminate lead. Be sure to 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. Find a list of products at www.nsf.org or on the MHD website at
http://city.milwaukee.gov/health/disease-Control-and-Environment/Drinking-Water.htm#.Va_OTWpFAdV
As of May 2015, several approved filters are available in the Milwaukee area at Target, ACE Hardware, and other locations.

5. Replace your lead service line or interior plumbing. Lead pipe is shiny when scraped with a screwdriver, and a magnet will not stick to it. (Galvanized steel pipe is dull when scraped and a magnet will stick to it.) Replacement must be done by a licensed plumber under contract from the homeowner.

In addition, you may wish to consider having children under the age of 6 and pregnant or breastfeeding women tested for lead in their blood. Lead has no beneficial role in the body and there is no minimum lead level that does not cause effects. Most lead poisoned people do not look or act sick. The City of Milwaukee Health Department recommends that children are tested 3 times before turning 3 (around 12 months, around 18 months, and around 24 months). Children up to age 6 should have a blood lead test if there is no record of a previous test, if they live in housing built before 1978 with recent or ongoing renovation, or if they have a sibling or playmate who has lead poisoning. Pregnant or breastfeeding women who were exposed to lead at an early age or are at risk of lead exposure due to their environment, occupation, or hobbies should also get tested.

For more tips and information on drinking water safety and lead, please visit the following websites:
http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/tips/water.htm
http://water.epa.gov/drink/info/lead/lead1.cfm
http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/drinkingwater/documents/forms/lead.pdf
http://city.milwaukee.gov/health/disease-Control-and-Environment/Drinking-Water.htm#.Va_OTWpFAdV

If you have questions about lead in drinking water, call Milwaukee Water Works at (414) 286-2585. If you have questions about the health effects related to lead in drinking water, contact the Milwaukee Health Department at (414) 286-3521.

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