

# Lead in Drinking Water

## Updated Guidance on Lead in Drinking Water

### Why are we concerned about lead in water?

Lead is a known toxin to humans and according to the World Health Organisations (WHO), affects both the central and peripheral nervous system. Infant's children and pregnant women are particularly at risk after prolonged exposure because lead can have an adverse impact on mental development. Worldwide it is recommended that human exposure to lead is kept to a minimum and lead is therefore controlled in air, soil, food and water.

### UK maximum concentrations allowed:

- 50µg/l in private water supplies
- 25 µg/l in public water supplies – reducing to 10 µg/l from December 2013. This is based on WHO guidance.

### Where are lead pipes found?

Before 1970, many smaller water pipes were made from lead, although lead pipes have not been permitted for this purpose for forty years. In older properties it remains possible that part, or all, of the underground service pipe connecting the water main in the street to your kitchen tap may be made from lead. It is also possible that some original lead plumbing remains within older properties especially if the kitchen has not been modernised. Properties built after 1970 should not have lead pipes.

### Checking for lead pipes

To check for lead pipes inside, look in or behind the cupboards in your kitchen. You may also need to look in other places, e.g. the cupboard under the stairs. Find the pipe leading to the kitchen tap. Check if it is lead along as much of its length as possible. Unpainted lead pipes appear dull grey.

They are also soft and if they are gently scraped you will see the shiny, silver-coloured metal beneath. You can ask a plumber to carry out this check for you.

**To check outside** your home open the flap of the stop valve outside your property and examine the pipe leading from the stop valve to the property. You should ask your water company or a plumber to carry out this check for you as in some cases access may be difficult.

## What's happening in our area?

In our area Bristol Water is in the process of upgrading main pipe work to remove lead pipes which are their responsibility and should have contacted affected properties recently. Bristol Water has also offered, for a fee, to carry out the upgrading works for the remaining pipes which may be present, which are the property owners' responsibility.

Soft water areas are more affected by lead dissolving into the water due to the higher acidity of the water. Lead also dissolves in hard water areas but depends on how much lead piping is present and how long the water has been in contact with the lead before being used.

## How can I find out if there is lead in my drinking water?

If you suspect that your home has lead pipes you can ask Bristol Water to test the water at your kitchen tap for lead. Bristol Water take random daily samples from consumer taps for lead and they will give you a report of this testing in your local area (water supply zone) free on request. They will also tell you whether they are treating the water to minimise the likelihood of lead pick up. Your water company will be aware of and will tell you if you live in an area with a history of lead pipes having been used and not removed.

You can also have your water sampled by a private laboratory for which there may be a charge and this can be organised through your South Gloucestershire Council environmental health service.

If you live in social housing or you are a tenant further advice can be obtained from South Gloucestershire Council environmental health service.

## What do I do if I have got lead pipes to minimise the affect on my health?

If tests have confirmed a risk (presence of lead above 10 µg/l) then you should not drink water or use water for cooking that has been standing in the pipes for long periods. It is good practice to run the tap until the sink or bowl is full when the water has been unused overnight, or if no one has been at home during the day.

The above short term measure will protect you and your family but it is a waste of water and you should take steps as soon as practicable to replace the lead pipes between the stop valve outside your home and your kitchen tap.

When arranging for this you should notify Bristol Water because they are legally required to replace their communication pipe if all of the following criteria are met:

- Test results show the level of lead in your drinking water to be above the drinking water standard of 10 µg/l;
- The owner agrees to replace all lead pipes for which they are responsible;
- The owner requests the replacement of the communication pipe in writing.

## Other considerations

### Electrical safety

When replacing lead pipes make sure this does not reduce electrical safety by removing any earthing arrangements dependent on the pipes. Ask your electricity supplier if in doubt.

### If buying a property

Ask your surveyor to include a check of the nature and condition of the outside and internal pipes as part of the survey making special mention of lead. Contact Bristol Water for information about lead in the water supply zone. Purchasers increasingly make the cost of removing lead pipes part of their negotiations with vendors as to sale price.

### Contacts

- **Bristol Water** - 08457 023797
- **[Wessex Water Services](#)** - 0845 600 4600
- **Southwest Water** - 0800 169 1144

### Further Reading / References

1. **Drinking Water Inspectorate**  
Ergon House, Horseferry Rd, London, SW1P 2AL Tel: 030 0068 6400 E-mail: [dwi.enquiries@defra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:dwi.enquiries@defra.gsi.gov.uk) Website: <http://www.dwi.gov.uk>
2. **World Health Organisation**  
[http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/dwq/chemicals/lead/en/](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/dwq/chemicals/lead/en/)

**Free Internet access is available at all South Gloucestershire libraries**

**South Gloucestershire Council  
Environmental Protection  
Department for Environment and Community Services  
PO Box 299, Civic Centre, High Street,  
Kingswood, Bristol  
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**Tel: 01454 868001**

**Email: [Environmental.protection@southglos.gov.uk](mailto:Environmental.protection@southglos.gov.uk)**

**Web: [www.southglos.gov.uk/envpro](http://www.southglos.gov.uk/envpro)**