

1 Lead in drinking water

This fact sheet explains how to find out whether you are likely to have lead in your water supply, and how to reduce it. Lead is commonly found in air, soil, food and water. If lead builds up in the body it can be harmful, with pregnant women and children most at risk. Studies have shown that high lead affects mental development and it may be a factor in behavioural problems. It is therefore advisable to keep lead levels in drinking water as low as possible.

How does lead get into drinking water?

Lead can be picked up from service pipes and plumbing within the property. Service pipes connect each property to the water main. The internal plumbing may have lead pipework or lead-based solder in the pipe joints.

To reduce the risk of lead entering the water supply, we treat our water with phosphate. This forms a protective layer inside pipes which acts as a barrier.

Does my house have lead pipes?

Lead was commonly used as a material for service pipes up until 1970. If your home was built before that time it may have lead pipes.

You should be able to see your service pipe by locating the stopcock, usually under your kitchen sink or stairs. Otherwise ask a professionally qualified plumber. Unpainted lead pipes are a dull grey colour, although a shiny silver colour is revealed if they are scraped or cut. Lead is soft and easily bent.

Other commonly used pipe materials are copper (dull brown), iron (dark grey or brown) and plastic (grey, black or blue). If you are unsure what your pipe is made of, we may be able to tell you by checking our records.

Even if the water pipe to your home is made of other materials, lead may still be present in the water if a lead-based solder has been used (see below for more details).



Where can lead-based solder be used?

The Regulations which cover plumbing systems in England do not allow the use of lead-based solder in domestic hot and cold water systems. It can only be used where the water is not to be consumed, such as the central heating system. There have been cases of lead poisoning due to the illegal use of lead-based solder. Where we find lead-based solder used illegally, all joints must be replaced with lead-free solder. Installers may face a criminal prosecution if they have contravened the Regulations.

How can I find out the lead level in my water?

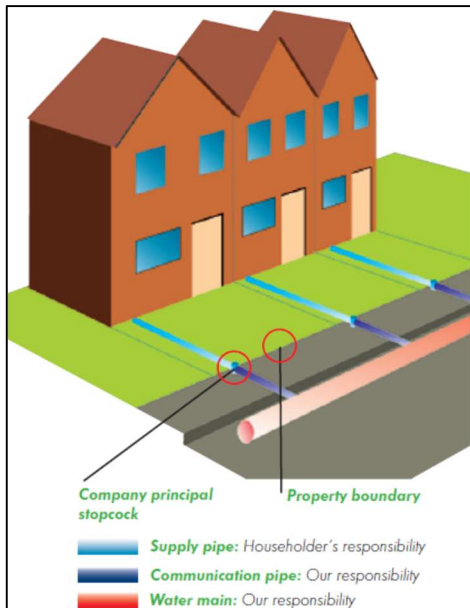
Our Customer Service team can arrange this for you. We do not charge for this service, although we may do so if the property has been tested for lead previously, in which case you will be advised accordingly. *

* N.B. If you have had any plumbing works carried out on the internal or external pipework at your property please wait at least 4 weeks before testing to ensure that a representative result can be obtained.

Who is responsible for the pipework?

The service pipe linking our water main to a private property is in two sections. We own the first section (the 'communication pipe'), which runs from our water main to the street boundary. A stopcock is usually located at this point. The remaining pipework (the 'supply pipe') is the responsibility of the property owner.

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How can I minimise lead levels in my drinking water?

The following actions will reduce the amount of lead consumed.

- For drinking and cooking, only use water from taps fed directly from the water main, e.g. the cold kitchen tap.
- Do not drink water that has been standing in lead pipes for long periods, for example overnight. Flushing a toilet is usually sufficient to draw off the water standing in the service pipe. Otherwise fill a bowlful of water at the kitchen sink. This water can be used to water plants.
- When having plumbing work carried out, check that lead free solder is used and if you have lead pipes, flush the cold water kitchen tap for at least 10 minutes before using the water again. Over the next three days you should also flush the tap for 2 minutes after periods of non-use, such as first thing in the morning, to clear and lead particles dislodged by the work.
- Consider replacing lead pipework.

If you replace any lead supply pipe, or carry out any plumbing in your property, we recommend you arrange for this work to be carried out by a WaterSafe approved plumber, a list of which can be found on their website www.watersafe.org.uk.

Free Lead Pipe Replacement Scheme

We routinely replace lead communication pipes, for example when we are laying a new water main or if a high level of lead is detected in a water sample taken at the property.

We also replace lead communication pipes when the customer (or property owner) replaces their part of the service pipe, providing it is also made of lead.

We will need to inspect and pass your newly laid supply pipe in accordance with the Water Supply (Water Fittings) Regulations 1999 prior to connection onto our water main. Please refer to our information on laying a new supply pipe (located on our website on the Developers tab) for further details.

If you are using an approved contractor under a Water Industry Approved Plumbers' Scheme (WIAPS) we will require the necessary documentation prior to connecting the new supply pipe onto our water main.

All existing household properties are eligible under this scheme, as well as selected properties such as schools and hospitals. Properties on a shared service pipe are also eligible.

Under the scheme, we replace the communication pipe at our expense providing the required route of the new pipe does not involve abnormal costs. If it does, we will subsidise the cost of the work.

You will be required to have a current account number with us to participate in this scheme.

Contact our Network Services team for more details.