

From the New York State Department of Health (more at <https://www.health.ny.gov/publications/2508/>)

What is lead?

Lead is a metal found naturally in the environment. It has also been widely used over the years in gasoline, house paint and plumbing fixtures. The amount of lead that is released into the environment each year has been greatly reduced by less use of leaded gas, starting in the mid-1970's. Laws forbidding the use of lead in house paint (1978) and lead in plumbing solder (1986) have helped as well. Still, lead can be a problem, especially in older homes.

Why is lead a concern?

Lead can enter people's bodies in the food they eat, the air they breathe and the water they drink. A person is exposed to a substance when it enters their body. Lead can be harmful to health and cause problems when it builds up in the body. Too much lead in the human body can cause serious damage to the brain, nervous system and red blood cells. Pregnant women and young children are at the greatest risk even when their exposure is to low levels of lead for short periods of time. Young children between the ages of six months and six years are more likely to suffer health problems from lead exposure. Too much exposure to lead can result in lead poisoning. Lead poisoning can slow a child's physical growth and mental development and can cause behavior problems, mental retardation, kidney and liver damage, blindness and even death.

What is the level of lead in public drinking water supplies?

In July of 1991, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established an action level for lead in public drinking water at 15 micrograms per liter, which is the same as 15 parts per billion (ppb). Water suppliers must routinely test household tap water to check lead levels. If lead levels in the water are above the EPA action level and can not be quickly corrected, the water supplier is required to notify homeowners and take steps to reduce lead levels in the drinking water.

What do the laboratory results mean?

If the test results of your drinking water show lead higher than 15 parts per billion, then your local health department can advise you on what to do. If the results are for what is called a "first draw" sample, these results probably represent what was sitting in the pipes overnight and the best action is probably to run the water until it is cold before using it. If you have results from a "flush" sample, they are likely to represent what you would be drinking; the proper response to an elevated level in that case would be to identify and remove the lead source or treat the water.

How do I know if someone in my family has high blood lead levels?

Lead in drinking water is only one possible source of lead in the body. Since our biggest concern is for small children, a New York State regulation calls for universal screening of all children at about age one and age two for blood lead levels. It is important to identify an elevated level of lead in a child as early as possible to reduce or remove the source of exposure, before any long-term health problems occur. Pregnant women should also discuss with their physicians the need for blood lead testing. If you have any questions about testing for lead in drinking water or if you want advice on how to lower the lead levels in your drinking water, contact the local health department for your county. The New York State Department of Health can also provide information about lead. For more information about control of lead in public water supplies, call the Bureau of Public Water Supply Protection, 518-402-7650. For questions about lead poisoning prevention and education, call 518-402-7600.