



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

22nd October 2008

HSE Statement Lead in drinking water

Recent tests by Water Services Authorities (Local Authorities) in some parts of Ireland have found levels of lead in drinking water above the standard which is 25 microgrammes per litre. The World Health Organisation assumes that about 50% of a person's intake of lead comes from drinking water.

In the 1950s lead was recognised to pose a hazard to health particularly to the developing brain. Not everyone is equally at risk of harmful effects from lead. Children aged less than 6 years and the unborn child are more vulnerable to adverse effects from exposure to lead. Older children and adults are more resistant to harmful effects from lead exposure. Only some of the lead ingested is absorbed by the body. Low levels of lead taken in over many years are not harmful to health. At higher levels of intake lead can accumulate in the body and cause ill-health.

Reducing human exposure to lead is an important public health goal. Routes of exposure include food, water and air. In recent decades several steps have been taken to reduce exposure to lead.

- Lead in paint was banned. Young children chewing paint off their cots and off toys was a recognised route of exposure to lead.
- The use of lead pipe work in plumbing was discontinued from about 1970.
- Lead was removed from petrol in the 1980s.

While lead occurs naturally in the environment, very little enters drinking water. The usual source of lead found in drinking water originates from lead pipe work, solder or fittings in the house plumbing or in the service connections from the water mains. Reducing lead in drinking water involves the replacement of lead pipes and fittings. Responsibility to replace lead pipes from the main stopcock to the house rests with the homeowner. The Water Services Authority (Local Authority) is responsible for replacing lead distribution mains and lead service pipes up to the stopcock.

Increased levels of lead in drinking water may be detected in samples taken from houses built before 1970, particularly if the sample is taken first thing in the morning before the cold tap is run. This is because the water may be stagnant in a lead pipe overnight.

To reduce the risk from lead in old houses:

- Drink water from the kitchen cold tap only. Do not drink water from the hot tap or from the bathroom.
- If you have a lead pipe supplying your house, replace it. Until such time as it is replaced the following precaution is recommended:
 - Do not drink water that has been standing in the pipes for long periods, overnight or for more than six hours while no one has been at home. In these circumstances, fill a standard washing up bowl from the cold tap before drawing water for drinking or cooking.

At all water lead levels, breastfeeding is safe and is the best way to feed babies.

Boiling water does not remove lead.

For additional information see Frequently Asked Questions and other links below:

European Communities (Drinking Water) (No. 2) Regulations 2007 (S.I. No. 278 of 2007).
<http://www.attorneygeneral.ie/esi/2007/B25297.pdf>

Environmental Protection Agency
<http://www.epa.ie/environment/water/drinking/>

Water Services Authority (Local Authority)
www.enviro.ni/en/LocalGovernment/LocalGovernmentAdministration/LocalAuthorities/