

Lead in drinking water – FAQs

What is lead?

Lead is a metal found naturally in soil and rocks. It used to be more common in the human environment due to its widespread historic use in petrol, paint, and water pipes. Lead was prohibited from use in water pipes in the late 1960s because of the risk lead poses to human health.

Is lead harmful?

The health risks associated with lead are well established. The risks relate to the way lead can build up in the body. Those at particular risk are infants and children because lead can have an adverse impact on mental development and behaviour. It is recommended that human exposure to lead is kept to a minimum therefore lead levels are controlled in air, soil, food, and water.

A full report on the internationally agreed health based knowledge about lead can be found on the World Health Organization (WHO) website.

Could there be lead in my drinking water?

It is unlikely that you will have unacceptable levels of lead in your water. Over 98% of the properties we test have acceptable levels of lead. Bristol Water tests and treats water for lead but sometimes lead can become present when it comes into contact with plumbing systems in your home. The amount of lead in your water will depend on the condition of the pipe and how long the water has been standing in contact with the pipework. Disturbance to lead pipework (e.g. vibrations, plumbing work) may also lead to an increased level of lead in the water supply.

How may it have affected me?

If you think your property has lead pipework the first thing you should do is get your water tested. Contact us and we will test the lead content of your water supply free of charge. If the lead levels in your water supply meet the drinking water standard (i.e. are below 10µg/l) the health risk posed by your drinking water is considered to be very low.

If you are concerned about the health effects of lead you should contact Public Health England for advice on 0300 303 8162 or contact your GP.

Are there lead pipes in my home?

If your home was built after 1970 or has undergone extensive refurbishment it's unlikely to have lead pipes because the installation of lead water pipes was banned in the late 1960s. If your home was built before 1970 it may have lead pipes.

If you are unsure, you can carry out the following checks or call a plumber to carry them out for you:

Inside your home

Find the point where your water service pipe enters your property – this is likely to be under your kitchen sink or in a hatch near the front door. Unpainted lead pipes appear dull grey in colour. They are soft and the surface can be scraped to reveal shiny silver-coloured metal beneath. Other common pipe materials are copper (bright, hard, and dull brown/orange), iron (dark, very hard, perhaps rusty), plastic (Poly) (typically light blue, but perhaps black or grey).

Outside your home

Open the flap of the stop tap or water meter box outside your property and examine the pipe - this may not be possible as access is often difficult. You may not have an external boundary box if your house is very old.



How do I find out the level of lead in my drinking water?

If you suspect you have lead pipework we are happy to test the level of lead in your water supply free of charge. Please contact Customer Services on 0345 702 3797 or e-mail customer.services@bristolwater.co.uk to request a lead test.

What is the acceptable level of lead in drinking water?

The current UK drinking water quality standards state that the level of lead in any water supply must not exceed 10µg/l (parts per billion). This came into force in December 2013 after the previous standard of 25µg/l was tightened. The UK standard is derived from the World Health Organisation's 2004 Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality and was implemented to protect the most vulnerable consumers, infants and children, over a whole lifetime, which therefore would be protective for other age groups.

A history of the guideline development for lead in drinking water can be found on the World Health Organisation's website.

What is Bristol Water doing about lead?

We are doing quite a bit to help reduce the amount of lead in drinking water. We treat all our water in high risk areas for lead and if we test your water and it is above 8µg/l we will change our part of the lead pipe. If you decide to change your part of the lead pipe then we will change ours, free of charge, regardless of the sample result.

We also have a programme to replace our lead pipe work at all infant and primary schools we supply. Also if we are renewing or renovating the water main outside your house, we will take the opportunity to change our part of the lead pipe as well.

How can I reduce the level of lead in my drinking water?

To minimise the amount of lead in your drinking water we recommend replacement of lead pipework with either plastic or copper.

The risk of lead entering your water supply increases if water is allowed to stand in prolonged contact with lead pipework or fittings. Allowing the tap to run for a minute or so before taking water for drinking or cooking should help to reduce lead levels by removing water that has been standing in contact with lead pipework or fittings. This water does not have to be wasted; it could be used for watering plants. After running the tap, water could be stored in a jug in the fridge for use later in the day to avoid having to run the tap again. Remember that, once drawn from the tap, water should be consumed within 24 hours.

Will a water filter/filter jug remove lead from my water supply?

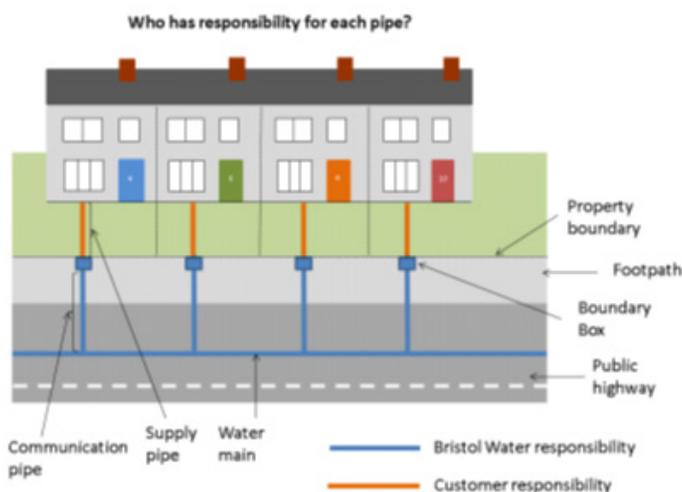
A filter jug may remove some lead in particulate form (i.e. 'bits' of lead broken off from the pipe surface) but will not remove lead that has dissolved into the water.

I want to replace my lead pipework. What do I do?

Please visit the lead pipe replacement section of our website (www.bristolwater.co.uk). There you will find all the information you need and you can apply online for a visit from one of our Network Site Agents, who will provide advice on the practical details specific to your property.

All the pipework within the property boundary is the responsibility of the homeowner. Bristol Water is responsible for the communication pipe only. This is normally the section of pipe from the water main up to the property boundary.

The diagram below illustrates a typical domestic property and who has responsibility for each section of the service pipe connecting the house to the water mains:



How much will it cost to replace my lead pipes?

The cost depends on a number of factors specific to each property, such as length of the pipe, depth of the pipe and surrounding material (e.g. concrete, earth). We recommend first obtaining a number of quotes from approved plumbing contractors before making your decision. Please visit www.watersafe.co.uk for a list of approved plumbers in your area.