

May 2016

Common questions about lead and drinking water

I have learned there is lead in the water in the building where I work. What are the risks to my health?

- The health risks from exposure to levels of lead in drinking water are very low. Nevertheless, there is no safe level of exposure to lead in any form.
- In an abundance of caution we are notifying staff and taking precautions to ensure any level of lead in our drinking water is in compliance with Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines.
- There has been no good evidence suggesting that British Columbians are routinely exposed to levels of lead in drinking water that put their health at risk.

Does BC have a drinking water quality standard for lead?

- Yes. British Columbia follows the Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines for lead; the maximum acceptable concentration for lead in drinking water is 0.010 micrograms per litre (mg/L) or 10 parts per billion.

How many buildings are affected at Island Health?

- Buildings that were built before 1989 are affected. After 1989, building codes changed and we stopped using lead of any form in pipes or solder carrying our drinking water.
- Fortunately, it has been determined that in areas where levels of lead have been detected, flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds restores the water to levels well within the Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines.
- Signage has been placed in those areas where flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds is encouraged before drinking.
- A longer-term plan is being developed to test for lead in the water at all Island Health buildings. This will occur as soon as possible in buildings that were built before 1989 and may be expanded to include others as necessary.
- Lead in the water is not an issue unique to Island Health facilities but can also occur in residential dwellings built before the building codes changed (1989).

What about lead in sources other than drinking water?

- People are exposed to lead inside and outside. It's in the air, soil, dust, drinking water, food and many other products. Older homes may have lead-based paint, and people can be exposed if they get paint chips or paint dust in their mouths. Young children can be exposed to lead if they get dirt or dust in their mouth from their hands or other objects that are contaminated with lead. Some off shore jewelry and toys have been associated with significant amounts of lead and efforts are ongoing to keep these products away from the public.

What is Island Health doing to reduce the lead in the drinking water?

- Fortunately, through systematic testing of the drinking water, it has been determined that in areas where lead has been detected, flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds restores any level of lead in the water to levels well within the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines.
- Signage has been placed in those areas where flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds is recommended before drinking.
- Where necessary, we are also installing new taps and faucets, lead reducing filters, or auto-flush mechanisms to ensure any lead in the water is restored to levels well within the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines. A longer-term plan is being developed to test for lead in the water at all Island Health buildings. This will occur as soon as possible in buildings that were built before 1989 and may be expanded to include others as necessary.

How will I know which taps are affected?

- Signage has been placed in those areas where flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds reduces the presence of lead to acceptable levels within the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines.
- Prior to building code changes in 1989, lead was a common component in many plumbing materials.

How will I know how long to run the taps?

- Signage has been placed in those areas where flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds reduces the presence of lead to acceptable levels within the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines.

Is it safe to use the water to brush my teeth? Wash my hands?

- There are no health risks associated with brushing your teeth or washing your hands.

Does boiling the water first eliminate lead in the water?

- No. Boiling water will not eliminate the presence of lead in the drinking water.
- Flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds before boiling the water – where signs are posted – is recommended.

How can I be guaranteed that flushing the taps gets rid of the problem?

- Fortunately, it has been determined that in areas where levels of lead have been detected, flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds restores the water to levels within the Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines.

Isn't flushing taps simply a waste of water?

- While you are flushing, you can capture the water in a watering can for plants, or use it to practice proper hand hygiene.

Will Island Health bring in water coolers for my work area?

- Fortunately, through systematic testing of the drinking water, it has been determined that providing bottled water is not necessary.

- Flushing the water for 15 to 30 seconds greatly reduces the presence of lead in the drinking water to acceptable levels within the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines.

What can I do to make sure the water I use at home is safe for drinking as well?

- If you live in a house built before 1989, here are a few simple steps to ensure the water you are drinking is of the highest quality:
 - **Flush your pipes before drinking:**
 - The more time water has been sitting in a pipe, the greater the opportunity for any lead to enter the water. Any time the water in a particular faucet has not been used for several hours, "flush" your cold-water pipes by running the water for 30 seconds.
 - **Only use cold water for eating and drinking:**
 - Use only water from the cold-water tap for drinking and cooking. If lead is present, hot water will produce higher levels of lead. Run the cold water tap until the water temperature drops and becomes consistently cold. (This advice includes times when you are drawing water for filling your kettle. Boiling does not remove lead from water!)

I am concerned that I may have increased lead levels in my body. What should I do?

- If you are concerned about your health, please make an appointment to see a physician, who will run some tests to determine if in fact you have elevated levels of lead in your blood.
- Remember, common sources of lead are chips of old paint containing lead, ingestion of soil contaminated with lead, recycling of old car batteries and home hobbies that may involve the use of lead (for example, to make bullets, lead fishing weights or cast toy soldiers).
- If you are concerned about potential elevated lead levels in your home's drinking water, you can contact an environmental health officer. [Click here](#) to contact an Environmental Health Officer in your area or visit the Island Health website at <http://www.viha.ca/mho/contacts/hpes.htm> (They will advise you on possible risks and how to get your water tested.)

Resources:

Health Canada's Lead webpage:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/contaminants/lead-plomb/asked_questions-questions_posees-eng.php

Island Health, Health Protection and Environmental Services

<http://www.viha.ca/mho/contacts/hpes.htm>