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Portland Water Bureau Takes Steps to Reduce Lead Exposure

Protecting public health and reducing your family's exposure to lead is a top priority of the Portland Water Bureau.

In Portland, exposure to lead in water is linked to home and building plumbing and fixtures, especially homes built between 1970 and 1985 that are more likely to have lead solder in their plumbing. Neither Portland's water sources nor the Water Bureau-maintained distribution system are significant sources of lead in Portland drinking water.

Portland's water is naturally corrosive. Water left standing in contact with plumbing components that contain lead can cause lead to leach into drinking water. Because of this, the Water Bureau treats the water to make it less corrosive by adjusting the pH of the water.

To monitor the effectiveness of the pH adjustment, the Portland Water Bureau routinely tests more than 100 homes known to have lead in plumbing. In the most recent testing by the Portland Water Bureau, elevated lead was detected in 11 out of 112 of these known "high-risk" homes across the Portland metropolitan area. This is less than 10 percent of homes tested, which is below the federal action level. Test samples were taken under the worst conditions, and do not indicate the level of lead likely to be found in the vast majority of homes that get their water from Portland. These test results do not trigger any regulatory requirements, however, as a practice, the bureau proactively communicates about how communities can reduce their risk for lead exposure.

"These high-risk homes do not represent the typical levels of lead in Portland homes," says Portland Water Bureau Administrator Michael Stuhr. "Nevertheless, we acknowledge there is no safe level of exposure to lead. This is why we are taking an aggressive approach to further reduce lead levels, starting with an expedited treatment pilot that should be completed in the next year."

On June 6, the Portland Water Bureau will further adjust the drinking water treatment for pH from 8.1 to a pH of 8.2 as an interim step to further reduce lead in water levels while the bureau continues constructing an improved corrosion control treatment facility, scheduled to be operational in 2022.

Since last fall when high-risk homes were similarly found to have elevated lead levels, the bureau has accelerated its work on more aggressive corrosion control treatment. It has completed a study on various options for reducing lead, presented those findings to Portland City Council in March, and requested approval of a corrosion control treatment pilot to determine the most effective treatment improvements. This pilot is currently underway.

For over 20 years, the Portland Water Bureau has led a comprehensive compliance approach to the Lead and Copper Rule, the federal regulation that determines how water systems should treat drinking water to reduce exposure to lead and copper.

This compliance program, which includes corrosion treatment, was put in place in 1997. Current treatment has reduced lead results in homes by up to 70 percent. The program also offers free lead in water testing to all customers with targeted outreach to those most at-risk – homes with lead solder and children 6 and under. In 2016, the Portland Water Bureau provided free lead-in-water test kits to more than 14,000 customers, a 400 percent increase over the previous year.

“Fortunately there are several simple steps customers can take to reduce their exposure to lead in water” says Stuhr. “We encourage our customers, especially pregnant women or families with young children, to test their water for lead, and we always recommend that customers flush their water before drinking. This simple step can reduce lead in water levels by nearly 90% percent.”

To get your water tested for lead or for more information on reducing lead exposure around your home or building and the health effects of lead, contact the LeadLine at www.leadline.org or 503-988-4000. If testing shows elevated levels of lead in water at your tap, or you are concerned about exposure, please see the attached graphic for easy steps you can take now to reduce your exposure to lead in water.

- 1. Run your water to flush the lead out.** If the water has not been used for several hours, run each tap for 30 seconds to 2 minutes or until it becomes colder before drinking or cooking.

2. **Use cold, fresh water for cooking and preparing baby formula.** Do not cook with or drink water from the hot water tap; lead dissolves more easily into hot water. Do not use water from the hot water tap to make baby formula.
3. **Do not boil water to remove lead.** Boiling water will not reduce lead.
4. **Test your child for lead.** Ask your physician or call the LeadLine to find out how to have your child tested for lead. A blood lead level test is the only way to know if your child is being exposed to lead.
5. **Test your water for lead.** Call the **LeadLine** at **503-988-4000** to find out how to get a FREE lead-in-water test.
6. **Consider using a filter.** Check whether it reduces lead – not all filters do. Be sure to maintain and replace a filter device in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions to protect water quality. Contact NSF International at **800-NSF-8010** or www.nsf.org for information on performance standards for water filters.
7. **Regularly clean your faucet aerator.** Particles containing lead from solder or household plumbing can become trapped in your faucet aerator. Regularly cleaning every few months will remove these particles and reduce your exposure to lead.
8. **Consider buying low-lead fixtures.** As of January, 2014 all pipes, fittings and fixtures are required to contain less than 0.25% lead. When buying new fixtures, consumers should seek out those with the lowest lead content.