The EPA suggests the following steps to minimize lead in your drinking water.

1. Determine the quality of your water. Contact your water utility if you’d like to receive a copy of its annual water quality report (i.e., a Consumer Confidence Report). Public water systems must also alert you if there is a problem with your system’s drinking water.

2. Take action. Let the water in your pipes run before using it for drinking or cooking. How long? Your water system has specific recommendations. Only use water from the cold-water tap for eating and drinking. Note that boiling water will NOT get rid of lead contamination. Use water filters or treatment devices—but verify with independent certifying organizations to make sure the device actually removes lead. Consider replacing pipes, solders, and plumbing fixtures that contain lead.

Drinking water contaminated with lead poses a significant danger to public health. Lead can affect almost every organ and system in adults. Some common effects:
- increased blood pressure
- decreased kidney function
- reproductive problems
- memory loss

It poses the greatest risk to infants, children under the age of 6, and pregnant women—potentially causing:
- premature birth
- delayed growth
- lower IQ
- learning/behavioral problems

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and other public health agencies have determined that there is no level of lead that is safe for consumption.

Drinking water usually comes from corrosion of pipes, solders (joints), or fixtures made of lead or brass that carry water from a treatment plant to houses or buildings.

Corrosion occurs when these plumbing materials come into contact with corrosive water—for example, water with low pH.

According to a recent industry estimate, there are 6.1 million lead pipes throughout the United States that deliver drinking water to 15–22 million people.

How does water get to your home?

To reduce lead in the nation’s drinking water, the EPA introduced the Lead and Copper Rule in 1991—a complex regulation that requires collaboration among the EPA, states, water systems, and homeowners.

This rule applies to 45% of water systems (those that serve the same customers for at least 6 months of the year).

Water systems must routinely take samples of tap water, and notify homeowners and states of the test results. When they find lead above the lead action level*, they must, as appropriate:
- Apply corrosion control treatments (such as adjusting the pH of the water).
- Test water quality conditions, and if necessary, replace lead pipes owned by the water system.
- Test and treat the source water.
- Provide educational materials to consumers (and others).

The state then reports this information to EPA’s Safe Drinking Water Information System. The EPA uses this database to oversee and monitor compliance with the rule.

* The lead action level established by the rule is 15 parts per billion in over 10 percent of the water samples. This level, when exceeded, indicates to water systems that corrosion control is needed or not working correctly.

How Can the EPA Improve Oversight of the Lead and Copper Rule?

They could collect data on, among other things, where lead pipes are located.

They could use additional statistical analysis to predict whether some water systems have a higher likelihood of having a reported violation of the rule.

What Can You Do About Lead in Your Drinking Water?

The EPA suggests the following steps to minimize lead in your drinking water.

1. Determine the quality of your water.
2. Take action.

LOOKING FOR MORE INFORMATION? See GAO-17-424 at GAO.GOV

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