



Oak Park's Drinking Water

Answers to frequently asked questions about lead

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How likely are Oak Park residents to be at risk from lead in their drinking water?

Some homes may have small traceable amounts of lead in their water, but testing indicates Oak Park homes do not have levels approaching amounts that are a cause for concern under U.S. Environmental Protection Agency guidelines. However, given the fact that most houses in Oak Park were built in the early 1900s when it was common practice to use lead pipes for interior plumbing, residents are encouraged to remain vigilant. Lead piping was not outlawed until 1986, and homes built as recently as 2011 could contain brass fixtures made of lead.

How does lead get into drinking water?

Corrosion or wearing away of lead-based materials can add lead to tap water, especially if water sits for a long time in the pipes before use. Lead can enter tap water if the service line that connects a home to the municipal water main in the street is made of lead. Lead also can get into tap water from lead pipes in a home, or if a home has lead solder pipe joints or brass fixtures. The main water pipes in the street that transport water from the reservoirs are made mostly of iron and do not add lead to the water.

Does the Village of Oak Park test for lead?

Yes. The Village is required by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to test for lead every three years from IEPA-approved homes. The Village does not have laboratory facilities to test for lead in drinking water, but contracts with a lab certified by the Illinois Department of Public Health. The most recent sampling period was during the summer of 2015. The report is posted at www.oak-park.us/waterqualityreport. The Village complies with all IEPA testing requirements and has met those requirements every year since testing began in 1997.

Where does the Village of Oak Park get its water?

The Village purchases Lake Michigan water from the City of Chicago. Water arrives pretreated via pipelines from the City of Chicago's Jardine Water Purification Plant, which is the largest water treatment plant in the world.

What does the Village of Oak Park do to prevent elevated lead levels?

The Village receives water from the City of Chicago ready to drink, but does add additional disinfectants to maintain quality up to the point of use. The City adds chemicals at its treatment facility that coat the inside of the pipes to inhibit corrosion and lead from leaching, the two main causes of lead in a water supply. While it is possible that some homes may still have lead service lines or lead solder pipe joints, the City's corrosion control methods reduce the amount of lead leaching into water from these sources as well. These anti-leaching, anti-corrosion additives are safe for consumers.

How susceptible is Oak Park to a public health crisis like what happened in Flint, Mich.?

Oak Park's water is treated with consumption-safe chemicals that inhibit lead from leaching into the water supply and pipe corrosion, the primary sources of the high lead content found in Flint's municipal water supply. For budgetary reasons, these chemicals were not used in the Flint water supply, a local government administrative decision that would never be made in Oak Park.

What are the chances the old Village's water mains are adding lead to the supply?

The 105 miles of municipal water mains are mostly cast iron. Some lead solder joints still remain, but like all other pipes transporting the municipal water supply, they are coated by the additives the City of Chicago uses to inhibit corrosion and lead leaching. In addition, unlike water in one's home, the water in the Village's mains flows constantly. The likelihood of leaching anything into the water occurs from standing water. That's why experts recommend that homeowners run their water before use if it has not been used in the previous six hours.

What would be the most likely source of lead in my home's water?

If you have lead in your home's water, the source most likely is the service line pipe connecting your home to the municipal water main, lead solder joints in your home's own plumbing or brass fixtures manufactured prior to 2011. Historically, service lines that run to homes from the water main were made from lead. Over time, many of these older service lines have been replaced by property owners, but your home could still have one.

If my home has a lead service line, can it be replaced?

Yes. A property owner can change the water service line from lead to copper, as has been done on many properties as part of remodeling projects. Property owners are responsible for the cost of replacing the service line from the shutoff valve in the parkway to the house. The Village will change the service line from the shutoff valve in the parkway to the Village's water main if needed, and restore the pavement at no cost to the resident. The Village portion of the work is required under local ordinance.

Should I test my drinking water for lead?

If you are concerned about the possibility of lead in your water, you may wish to have your water tested by a certified laboratory. A list of certified laboratories is available on the Village website. If you have difficulty finding a certified firm for testing, contact the Public Works Department at 708.358.5700 or email publicworks@oak-park.us for help.

What are the health effects of lead in drinking water?

Lead can cause serious health problems if too much enters your body from drinking water or other sources. It can cause damage to the brain and kidneys, and can interfere with the production of red blood cells that carry oxygen to all parts of your body. The greatest risk of lead exposure is to young children, pregnant women and infants – particularly if they drink formula prepared with water containing elevated levels of lead.

What measures can I take to reduce lead in drinking water at home?

The U.S. EPA recommends the following steps:

- Flush your pipes before drinking – The more time water has been sitting in your home's pipes, the more lead it may contain. Anytime water in a particular faucet has not been used for six hours or longer, flush the cold-water pipes by running the water until it becomes as cold as it will get. This could take as little as 30 seconds if there has been recent heavy water use such as showering or toilet flushing. To save water, use the water you flush out for watering plants.
- Use cold water for eating and drinking – Use only water from the cold-water tap for drinking, cooking and especially for making baby formula. Hot water is likely to contain higher levels of lead. Run cold water until it becomes as cold as it can get. Boiling water will not get rid of lead contamination.
- Use water filters or treatment devices – Many water filters and water treatment devices are certified by independent organizations for effective lead reduction. Devices that are not designed to remove lead will not work. Verify the claims of manufacturers by contacting NSF International (National Sanitation Foundation) at 800.NSF.8010 or visiting www.nsf.org. Some water filters that remove lead also remove fluoride. Residents with children may wish to discuss fluoride replacement with a dentist.
- Use bottled water – In homes with elevated lead levels, bottled drinking water should be used by pregnant women, breast-feeding women, young children and formula-fed infants.

Where can I find more information?

Information on lead in drinking water, testing methods and steps you can take to minimize exposure is available by calling the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1.800.426.4791 or by visiting www.epa.gov/safewater/lead. You also can review the Village's Annual Water Quality Report posted at www.oak-park.us/waterqualityreport. If you would like to discuss the issue with a local contact, call the Oak Park Public Works Department at 708.358.5700 or email publicworks@oak-park.us.