# Lead often pollutes annking water

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in 1986 some 40 million Americans were using drinking water containing potentially hazardous levels of tead. While other contaminants may receive more publicity, lead is one of the most harmful and widely occuring water pollutants. Compounding the problem is the fact that lead is tasteless, odorless and coloriess—at levels that are toxic.

Acute lead poisoning can cause severe brain damage and even death. The effects of chronic, low-level exposure, however, are more subtle. The developing nervous systems of fetuses, infants and children are particularly vulnerable. Recent studies show that lead exposure at a young age can cause permanent learning disabilities and hyperactive behavior.

Pregnant women should be especially concerned about lead in their drinking water. Lead not only may impair mental development of fetuses but can also increase the risk of low birth weight. Low-level lead exposure is also associated with elevation in blood pressure, chronic anemia and peripheral nerve damage.

What can be done to protect yourself and your family from the hazards of lead? First, it's important to know that very little lead occurs



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naturally in water; most of it leeches from lead plumbing. Common sources include service pipes from water mains, leaded solder in household plumbing or even brass faucets, which can contain from 3 to 8 percent lead.

You should have your water tested for lead, especially if your household includes children under 6, a pregnant woman or a woman likely to become pregnant. Check the Yellow Pages under "Laboratories — Testing" for an independent state-certified lab or use a mail-order lab (WaterTest, 1-800-426-8378; National Testing Laboratories, 1-800-458-3330; or Suburban Water Testing Laboratories, 1-800-433-6595). The test costs about \$30.

Ideally, the lead level in drinking water should not exceed five parts per billion. If the level is higher you can reduce it to some degree by taking a few simple steps. These

precautions are recommended for anyone whose water has such a lead level or for anyone who's not sure. (Unless testing shows otherwise, it's prudent to assume that your drinking water contains some lead.) m

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First, use only cold water for all cooking and drinking. Hot water tends to pick up more lead from pipes. Using cold water is especially important when preparing baby formula.

Never drink the first water out of your tap in the morning. Water that sits in the pipes overnight accumulates lead. Flushing the toilet or using the shower can help clear stagnant water from the piping system. When you do use your water for the first time, let the water run for about a minute, or until it's as cold as possible.

During the day, let tap run for a bit before drinking. Better yet, keep a pitcher of drinking water in the refrigerator.

A second test of your tap water can tell you if these measures lower lead levels to 5 parts per billion. If not — or if your water initially contained more than 20 parts per billion — you may need to take further action.

You should then consider drinking bottled water or installing a treatment device. Reverse-osmosis devices and distillers can be quite effective at lowering lead levels. So can an activated alumina lead-removal cartridge, such as the Selecto Lead Out-20, \$80. Don't bother with little faucet-mounted carbon filters. Consumer Reports' testers found that they were virtually useless at filtering out dangerous contaminants.

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