

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: CHICAGO WATER QUALITY

Is Chicago water safe?

Chicago water meets and exceeds all standards set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA), the Illinois EPA and the drinking water industry. Chicago passed its most recent review in October.

How often do you test the water?

The safety and quality of Chicago's tap water is our top priority. DWM continually monitors water quality and performs testing 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Further, DWM will test any resident's water for lead or other particles; residents can call 3-1-1 to request free water testing at their address if they have concerns about water quality. Residents are notified about their individual results, and data from all homes is posted online at chicagowaterquality.org, with identifying information removed.

It is safe for children to drink Chicago's water?

The key health measure for lead is the percentage of children with elevated blood levels of lead. Chicago has achieved significant success in reducing the percentage of children with elevated lead levels in recent years. Today, less than one percent of children have elevated (10 micrograms per deciliter or higher) lead levels as compared to 25 percent in the late 1990s.

The cause of elevated lead levels in children is usually linked to exposure to and ingestion of lead-based paint. When a child has an elevated blood lead level, CDPH is notified and conducts a home inspection to identify potential sources of lead. In 2011 and 2012, the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) and DWM spearheaded a program to study if drinking water was a source of lead for children with elevated blood lead levels. This pilot found that most cases of elevated blood lead levels in children were a result of lead-based paint.

Since 2016, CDPH has offered water testing when conducting inspections for children with elevated lead levels. Of those tested, no child with an elevated blood level lived in a home where the water had elevated lead levels.

What does the city do to protect residents from lead in water?

Chicago water meets or exceeds all standards set by the U.S. EPA, the Illinois EPA and the drinking water industry. DWM continually monitors water quality and performs testing 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Additionally DWM takes a proactive approach to mitigating lead in the water system by introducing corrosion control into water mains and providing residences and businesses with complete instructions for flushing whenever there is any water infrastructure work being done in the vicinity.

The city also offers residents free certified laboratory testing for traces of lead. Any resident who has a concern about the quality of their water can request a free test. The city makes all certified laboratory testing results available online for the public to review at chicagowaterquality.org.

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Do I need to have my water tested for lead?

Chicago's drinking water meets or exceeds state, federal and industry water quality standards. To protect the health of residents, DWM, like other cities, has an aggressive anti-corrosion program that minimizes the risk that lead and other metals may leach into the water. DWM adds a blended phosphate to the water, forming a protective coating on the pipes from the treatment center from the faucet, minimizing the risk that lead and other contaminants will leach into the water. However, any resident who is concerned about their water quality can call 3-1-1 or visit chicagowaterquality.org to request a free water lead test kit.

Residents who are concerned about lead levels may also flush, which means that after water hasn't been used for six hours, running water continuously for a minimum of 5 minutes before consuming water. Studies show that in almost every case, flushing is an effective approach to lowering lead levels and exposure. Ways to flush include showering, as well as washing clothes and dishes.

How do I get my water tested?

Any resident can call 3-1-1 or visit chicagowaterquality.org to request a free water lead test kit. One will be sent to you with instructions for collecting the water samples. When you are done with the sampling, simply visit chicagowaterquality.org and schedule a time to have your samples picked up. You will be notified of your results and if they exceed the EPA action level, DWM will visit your home with a sanitary engineer, plumber and electrician to investigate a number of possible contributing factors and create a mitigation plan.

Where is lead found?

Lead and lead compounds have been used in a wide variety of products, like paint, ceramics, pipes and plumbing materials, gasoline, and batteries. As the federal government has learned more about the dangers of lead over the past several decades, it has been banned in plumbing, paint, and most consumer products.

The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) offers home inspections for various sources of lead hazards that may be present in the home. Homes may still have the presence of lead-based paint and lead plumbing. Residents concerned about potential sources of lead in their home may call 312-747-LEAD (5323) to schedule an appointment with a CDPH inspector. Residents that are concerned about lead levels in their water may call 3-1-1 or go to chicagowaterquality.org to request a free water test.

How do I know if I have a lead service line?

While we do not have an inventory of lead service lines, older single family and two-flat homes built before 1986 are likely to have lead service lines connecting homes to the water main. These lead service lines are owned by and are located on the property of homeowners. We estimate that approximately 375,000 homes have lead service lines.

What is the threshold for elevated levels of lead in water?

Chicago drinking water, along with all other municipal drinking water systems, are held to the U.S. EPA & CDC's (Center for Disease Control) benchmark of 15 parts per billion for drinking water. This is the same standard used by every other Great Lakes city.

What happens if my water has lead levels above the EPA action level?

If test results show lead levels above 15 parts per billion, the threshold for action, DWM will send a letter to the home with the test results. DWM will then schedule a return visit to the home, this time accompanied by a plumber, electrician and sanitary engineer to evaluate the site, determine the potential source of lead and recommend an appropriate mitigation plan.

Can you remove my water meter?

DWM does not recommend removing water meters. If a resident has meter and is concerned about the presence of lead in their system, they can call 3-1-1 and request a free water quality test. Residents with water meters will also be eligible for a free water filter set.

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