

Lead in the City of Benton Harbor Drinking Water FAQ

Background

Residents of the City of Benton Harbor are being asked to use free bottled water provided while the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is conducting a study to ensure that filters are effectively working to reduce lead exposure. The EPA will share these findings when the study is completed.



How am I exposed to lead in drinking water?

There are many sources of lead in our environment and, based on data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), most people in the U.S. have been exposed. Drinking water is one way that you can be exposed to lead. Lead in water can come from fixtures or plumbing within your home or it can come from lead service lines.

Upon request, MDHHS can investigate the sources of lead in homes and provide education on risk mitigation efforts based on the home's situation. For some homes we are able to offer lead abatement services. If you have concerns about the water quality in your local community, call your water supplier for free water testing. If lead is found in the water in your home, MDHHS can come test the water in your home.

Please call MDHHS at 866-691-5323 Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or visit Michigan.gov/MiLeadSafe for more information on lead.



Is the water safe to drink?

Due to a few homes having high lead levels in their water sample, Benton Harbor residents are being asked to use bottled water while work is completed to provide assurance that efforts like filtering are effective in reducing lead exposure.



How do I get blood lead testing?

Talk with your health care provider about getting a blood lead test for you and your loved ones if you are concerned about a recent or ongoing lead exposure. Blood lead testing cannot exclude a prior exposure to lead.

Children enrolled in WIC may be able to get a blood lead test at a WIC clinic. Call the Benton Harbor WIC clinic at 269-927-5646 to talk about a blood lead test for your child.

If you do not have a health care provider, contact the BCHD Public Health Hotline at 800-815-5485 to discuss their available services for blood lead testing.



Why can you shower or bathe with the water?

Swallowing lead-contaminated water is the main way lead gets out from water and into the body. The form of lead found in water is not easily absorbed into the body through skin. Small pieces of lead (particulates) will not absorb through the skin. The level of lead that dissolves in water is very low that any absorption through the skin is not significant.



Is the water safe for my pets?

Give your pet bottled water to drink. It is also recommended that you use bottled water when making your pet's food.



Can I use my water for my garden?

Irrigation (watering) your garden with lead-contaminated water does not significantly increase soil lead levels. Additionally, vegetables do not readily take up lead from the soil or water. If you are concerned about watering with lead-contaminated water, you can purchase a lead filter that attaches to your garden hose, purchase a rain barrel, or make a rainwater catchment system that is best for your garden.

Visit <https://bit.ly/LeadGardenSafety> for more information on lead safety and gardening.



Why are we advising this change now?

We are taking every precaution and leaning into this problem with all the tools that we have in concert with the city, local health department, Environmental Protection Agency, community groups and multiple state agencies.



What has been done so far in our community to mitigate risk?

Many efforts have been taking place since 2018, working closely with Berrien County Health Department and community organizations. This includes educational outreach, regular water sampling, mobile blood lead testing events, nursing case management of children who have elevated blood lead levels, health care provider outreach, filter distribution, free lead Environmental investigations and lead abatement, and community training.



What is an ALE community and how many are there?

Michigan has 10 communities with water systems in lead action level exceedance as of Nov. 2, 2021, including Benton Harbor. More are expected at results from Michigan's new, most-protective-in-the-nation lead standard come in. Sampling procedures instituted under the new standard are designed to find lead contamination more effectively from fixtures and pipes inside and outside the home. MDHHS is working in a larger group of 46 communities that have or have had a lead ALE in the past across the state to continue to reduce lead exposure in homes.



How long will the filter study last?

The EPA, MDHHS, and the Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) are working on these details now and further information will be shared when it is available.



Why is this happening in Benton Harbor and not other ALE communities?

Questions about water filter effectiveness have been raised because the city has been implementing a corrosion control strategy like one used in Newark, New Jersey. In Newark, three homes were identified as having high lead levels due to the chemical used in the water treatment process. The Environmental Protection Agency is planning a filter effectiveness study to ensure the filters are reducing the amount of lead in the water.

If you have concerns about the water quality in your local community, call the city for free water testing. If lead is found in the water in your home, MDHHS can come to test the water in your home. Please call MDHHS at 866-691-5323 Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.



I live in an ALE community. How do I know my water filter is working?

The filters that have been provided in lead ALE communities are certified to reduce the amount of lead in water. A Point of Use (POU) water filter reduces contaminants at the point water is being used, such as a faucet. Look for these certifications on the filter package: NSF/ANSI Standard 53 for lead reduction and NSF/ANSI Standard 42 for particulate reduction (Class I). It is important to **ONLY** use cold water through your filter and to follow the manufacturer's directions. For more information on choosing a POU water filter, go to <https://bit.ly/2vaHLkO>.

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