

Aquarion warns of lead pipes in Conn. homes

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Thousands of Connecticut residents have received notices from Aquarion warning them of lead, galvanized or unknown materials making up the pipes in their homes.

The water company, which serves almost 60 Connecticut municipalities, sent the letters after launching an online map that allows customers to view the service line materials for both the Aquarion-owned pipes and the customer-owned pipes.

Aquarion assured customers that there is no lead in its distribution system.

“The water that runs in our water mains is lead-free,” said Peter Fazekas, Aquarion’s director of corporate communications.

The company, however, does not have control over the customer-owned pipes and the indoor plumbing or fixtures. Customers are responsible for the portion of the service line from the curb valve, which is usually near the property line, to their home or business, the company said.

To reduce the risk of lead leaching into the water, the company says it also adjusts the water’s pH levels and has introduced corrosion inhibitors, which coat the pipes and fixtures in homes.

The letters, which began going out in mid-October, and map are part of a push by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to find and replace lead pipes in about 13 years.

Lead is a toxic metal and, even at low levels, can be harmful to one’s health, experts say. The metal is also persistent and can accumulate in the body over time, the EPA states. Low levels of lead in children’s blood can result in behavior and learning problems, lower IQ and hyperactivity, slowed growth, hearing problems and anemia. In rare cases, the metal can cause more severe symptoms in children, according to the EPA.

Lead can also affect pregnant women and developing fetuses, including reducing the fetus's growth and premature birth, according to the EPA. In adults, lead exposure can cause cardiovascular effects like increased blood pressure and hypertension, decreased kidney function and reproductive problems, the agency says.

Here's what you need to know if you received a letter:

Why did I receive a letter?

Aquarion is required to send the letter to comply with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Lead and Copper Rule Revisions. The revisions require public water systems to make a publicly accessible service line inventory — which is the online map — as well as notify customers whose service lines contain lead and provide information to the public on the health effects of lead.

These letters were intended to notify customers of whether their pipes contain lead or are galvanized, or whether it is unknown what materials they contain, the company says.

The EPA set a deadline for public water systems to comply with these requirements starting on Oct. 16, and systems will send notifications annually until the entire service connection no longer contains lead, according to the EPA.

The letters aren't intended to scare customers, Fazekas said.

"They are to make you think about what materials you have in your plumbing and to identify them," he said in a phone call Monday.

Who received letters? And what do they mean?

Though Aquarion is still sending out letters, it has sent out most of the 157,707 total it will send. Of those, most of the letters — some 148,916 — were sent to customers whose pipe materials are unknown, Fazekas said. He noted that most of the unknowns are on the customer-owned portion of the service line, as opposed to Aquarion's service line.

"For a customer that received an unknown letter, we'd like them to take our survey so we could identify the material of their service line," he said. "Once we receive that survey, we validate the information and then we update the online inventory accordingly."

The survey, which can be found online, provides a guide to help residents and business owners identify their service line materials. Those looking to inspect their pipes will need to grab a magnet, a camera or phone and either a coin or a flathead screwdriver. Residents will use the coin or flathead screwdriver to gently scratch the pipe, and will also see if the magnet sticks to the pipe.

The online guide states lead pipes are gray or silver, are scratched easily and produce shiny and silver marks. Magnets will not stick to these pipes.

Galvanized pipes are also gray or silver, and will not produce a visible scratch on the surface. Magnets will stick to these pipes, the guide states.

Once someone tests their pipes, they should compare the results with the guide and then snap a photo to submit in the online survey.

Some 5,712 customers have received letters notifying them of lead pipes, while 2,079 received letters about galvanized pipes, according to Fazekas.

He noted that the number of customers with lead and galvanized pipes has dropped after some customers received their letters, since some of the customers let the water company know their service line had already been replaced.

What do I do if I have lead pipes?

There are some options customers have if they have lead or galvanized pipes. The first is replacing their lines.

“If you have a lead line or a galvanized line, the sooner you replace it, obviously the better,” Fazekas said.

There is some state funding available to help fund these projects. If an Aquarion customer is thinking about replacing their lines, Fazekas recommended they call the company at 1-866-728-5023 to see if there is some state funding available to help with the costs.

Until someone can identify and replace the sources of lead, there are a few steps they can take to try to reduce their exposure to lead.

The EPA recommends that residents flush their home’s pipes by running the tap, taking a shower, doing laundry, or running the dishwasher before drinking or cooking. Residents should also always use cold water for drinking, cooking and preparing baby formula. Boiling water does not remove lead, the EPA states.

Aquarion also recommends those with lead service lines to run their faucets for three to five minutes any time that water has not been used in the home for several hours. This removes lead that may have gotten into the water from the plumbing.

Residents can also use certified water filters to remove lead. Hot water should not be ran through this filter, the EPA states.