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Asbestos in drinking water

What is asbestos?

Asbestos refers to a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres found in rock. For decades, asbestos was used as a building material in homes and other buildings.

Asbestos was also commonly used to make asbestos-cement pipes from the 1940s to the 1960s in Canada. The use of asbestos-cement pipes has been largely discontinued since the 1970s, but some remain in drinking water systems across Canada.

As asbestos-cement pipes reach the end of their lifespan or are exposed during construction, they are typically replaced with alternative pipes.

Always take precautions when handling deteriorating pipes to protect your health against inhaling asbestos that is released into the air. For more information on safe handling of asbestos, see WorkSafeBC – Safe Work Practices for Handling Asbestos at www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/books-guides/safe-work-practices-for-handling-asbestos?lang=en.

How can asbestos get into my drinking water?

Asbestos may get into water sources through runoff of mining tailings, improperly disposed of asbestos waste or through source water contact with asbestos-bearing bedrock. Standard community water treatment processes can remove natural asbestos that has entered water sources before it reaches drinking water system pipes.

When asbestos-cement pipes deteriorate, some asbestos fibres could be released into the drinking water distribution systems, causing people to ingest (drink or eat) it or breathe in (inhale) airborne water droplets.

Is using water from asbestos-cement pipes a risk to my health?

According to Health Canada and the World Health Organization, there is no consistent, convincing evidence that ingested asbestos is harmful to human health. For this reason, drinking water from asbestos-cement pipes is not considered a risk to your health.

While it is also possible that water droplets from the shower or humidifiers may contain asbestos fibres, exposure to these types of droplets is not considered a health risk.

Why is inhaling asbestos a health concern but not ingesting asbestos?

Many studies have found strong evidence indicating that inhaling asbestos fibres can cause cancers and lung diseases.

For information on health risks of inhaling asbestos, see HealthLinkBC File #32 Asbestos: When should I worry?

Health Canada and the World Health Organization have each independently reviewed existing evidence several times in the last decade and maintained their position each time that ingesting asbestos in drinking water does not pose a health risk.

Does BC monitor for asbestos in drinking water?

BC references Health Canada's Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality as the standard against which to measure water quality. At this time, Health Canada has not set a maximum acceptable concentration (MAC) to monitor asbestos in drinking water.

The BC Ministry of Health works with Health Canada and the BC Centre for Disease Control to stay informed on any emerging evidence to see if there is reason to change position or to create guidelines and will continue to monitor for new evidence that indicates ingesting asbestos has any health concerns.

For more information

Health Canada

For more information about asbestos in drinking water, see Health Canada – Asbestos in drinking water www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/asbestos-drinking-water-infographic-2021.html.

World Health Organization

For information about the development of drinking-water quality guidelines, see World Health Organization – Asbestos in drinking-water www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-HEP-ECH-WSH-2021.4.

Local Health Authorities

If you have concerns about the quality of water you are drinking, contact the local environmental health officer at your health authority:

- First Nations Health Authority 604-693-6500 or toll-free 1-866-913-0033
- Fraser Health 604-587-4600
- Interior Health 250-862-4200
- Island Health 250-370-8699
- Northern Health 250-565-2649
- Vancouver Coastal Health 604-736-2033