

# Information sheet about lead exposure in Waikouaiti, Karitane and Hawksbury



## What is lead?

Lead has been a huge part of our industrial history. In the past, it has been used in paint, petrol and in range of household items. That said, it has no benefit to the human body and as we learn more about the impacts of lead, we are working towards removing it from our homes and our environments.

If people are exposed to lead it can accumulate in the body over time. Prolonged exposure to a low level of contamination can lead to adverse health effects over time.

People in countries such as New Zealand are exposed to lead from many other sources around the home. Lead exposure is not a new problem - people have been exposed to lead for many decades. As a result of our efforts to remove lead from the environment, the amount of lead in our bodies has reduced dramatically over the generations.

## Who is most vulnerable?

Infants, older people, children up to six years of age, pregnant women and their babies are the most susceptible to any adverse health effects from lead.

## Is there usually lead in our water?

Lead can be present in drinking water dissolved from natural sources, or from household plumbing systems containing lead. The amount of lead dissolved will depend on the characteristics of the water and how long the water has been sitting in the pipes.

## What do we know about the possible exposure so far?

The test results show that there have been some intermittent spikes of high levels in some locations, but with most results in between those spikes below the acceptable level. We do know that the water does not contain high levels of lead all the time, but it is not clear how often

the spikes have happened. To ensure safety, we have advised not drinking the water until we can be assured the levels are acceptable for human health.

There has only been one result so far that showed elevated levels at the reservoir. This result was in the 'raw' water. When treated, the result was below the maximum acceptable level.

ESR has concluded that the risk to lead exposure through the Waikouaiti drinking water system is likely to be low based on a review of the available information. However, intermittent spikes of high lead levels in water is not a common situation and so previous experience and reports are few.

## What actions are being taken to protect our health in the short term? What's being done about this in the long term?

The most important action taken is that the community has been advised to stop drinking the affected water and tanks providing safe drinking water are present. By not drinking the tap water, you are no longer at risk of lead exposure from it.

We have asked the community to stop drinking the water or using it for food preparation. Boiling does not decrease lead content in water and may in fact concentrate it.

The tankered water will be available for as long as is needed.

Health officials are working closely with the Council who are looking into the issue and will provide updates as soon as more information is known. Free blood tests for lead levels are available and the Council is offering free fruit and vegetables to residents.

## What are the side effects of elevated lead levels?

Symptoms in adults can include tiredness, mood changes, memory impairment, sleeplessness, irritability, headaches, joint pains and gastro-intestinal symptoms: lack of appetite, nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, stomach pains and weight loss.

Young children may not exhibit any obvious illness but it may affect development if they have had exposure over time.

While it is possible for mothers to pass lead on to unborn babies and to infants through breastmilk, our advice is to continue breastfeeding due to all of the benefits breastfeeding gives. If it is found you have significantly elevated levels of lead in your blood, options should be discussed with your health provider.

### **What should I do if I have health concerns?**

If you are unwell and have concerns about your health, please contact your usual GP, who will be able to provide you with the right health advice.

### **How do I know if I have been exposed to lead?**

#### **How can I get tested?**

Free clinics offering blood testing for lead levels will be available for Waikouaiti, Karitane and Hawksbury residents. The blood test gives an indication of the overall level of lead exposure, and to help us understand whether it has been going on over a longer period. Babies and children may be able to have this done with a heel prick.

The clinics will be held at the East Otago Events Centre, Main Road, Waikouaiti:

- Tuesday 9th February 2-5pm (for young children and families)
- Weds 10th February 9am-4pm (for children and families)
- Thursday 11th February 3-7pm
- Friday 12th February 3-7pm

And at the Hui Room, Karitane Old School, 121 Grimness St, Karitane on Thursday 11 February: 3pm – 7pm

Alternatively, you can see your GP for health advice and they can order the blood test.

Free testing will be available for people who are normally resident in Waikouaiti and Karitane.

### **How will I receive my results?**

We understand you are eager to receive your test results. Processing these usually takes two to three days but may be available sooner. You will be contacted with your results. If you have not heard within three days (72 hours) please call 0800 622 683.

We will be holding a public meeting to share results from the testing in the next few weeks.

Please note expect most people to have detectable levels of the lead in their blood, as they will right across New Zealand. So being advised that lead is present in the blood is not in itself a cause for concern.

Further, we expect a number of people may have elevated blood lead levels as a result of other exposure, for example working with lead-based paint or other activities. Again, we cannot draw conclusions about the exposure to lead from the Waikouaiti water supply based on individual elevated results.

### **What else can I do?**

The most important action is to identify and stop any further exposure to lead – public health will help identify any other possible sources. It is especially important to ensure infant formula is not made from tap water until advised otherwise.

Making sure children's diets are high in iron, calcium and vitamin C decreases the amount of lead they absorb. If blood levels are very high, then there are treatments that can be used.

### **I live in the area - how long will we have to use tankered water? Where do I get this from? Where do I go for more information?**

It is not yet clear how long we will ask residents to not drink tap water. This will depend on the results of the investigations into the cause of the elevated lead readings, and how easily they can be addressed.

#### **Take-home messages**

If you have stopped consuming the tap water, you are no longer exposed to this potential source of lead. By participating in blood test screening, you are helping us understand if these spikes may have happened in the past. If you are concerned about your health, please see your GP for advice.

#### **Find out more**

Updates can be found at:

- [www.dunedin.govt.nz](http://www.dunedin.govt.nz)
  - [www.southernhealth.nz/lead-alert](http://www.southernhealth.nz/lead-alert)
- And keep an eye on our facebook pages.

You can also send questions to:

- [dcc@dcc.govt.nz](mailto:dcc@dcc.govt.nz)
- [publichealth@southernhdb.govt.nz](mailto:publichealth@southernhdb.govt.nz)