



Frequently Asked Questions on USVI Drinking Water

Does the EPA have any additional information about the lead and copper levels in water on St. Croix? Can you share the sampling results?

Of 66 samples taken, 35 exceeded EPA's lead action level of 15 parts per billion (ppb) - a level that requires follow up actions. Several samples exceeded the copper health-based standard of 1300 ppb. At 31 sites where samples revealed very high levels of lead, and after flushing the water for 3 to 5 minutes, the levels fell to below EPA's action level. However, two sites had samples that exceeded EPA action levels even after flushing.

What are the possible health effects of lead and copper?

There is no safe level of lead. Lead is a toxic metal that can cause damage to a child's ability to learn and a range of health damage in adults. Lead exposure can have serious, long-term health consequences in adults and children. Even at low levels, lead in children can cause I.Q. deficiencies, reading and learning disabilities, impaired hearing, reduced attention spans, hyperactivity and other behavioral problems. Lead exposure can also cause health problems in pregnant women and harm fetuses.

Copper is an essential nutrient, but some people who drink water containing copper in excess of the action level over a relatively short amount of time could experience gastrointestinal distress. Some people who drink water containing copper above the action level over many years could suffer liver or kidney damage.

What is flushing and can it remove lead in UVIS's system?

Flushing means that you run water long enough to ensure that the water in household plumbing and service lines is flushed through your faucet before you use the water for drinking or cooking. Flushing or running the tap has been shown to reduce the levels of lead in drinking water that has sat in the pipes and plumbing for an extended period of time because it clears out the water that has been in contact with the lead components before a resident uses the water.

When did EPA provide the sampling results to the USVI Government?

EPA and the University of the Virgin Islands helped collect drinking water samples and EPA analyzed these samples for metals. On Friday, October 13, 2023, EPA notified the Virgin Islands

Water and Power Authority, the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), and the Department of Health about these sampling results.

How did EPA find the elevated lead and copper levels?

At the request of the U.S. Virgin Islands government, EPA participated in joint sampling of the U.S. Virgin Islands Water & Power Authority (VIWAPA) drinking water system in multiple locations on St. Croix, USVI, in response to reports of red and brown discoloration in the water.

Through this recent targeted testing, EPA’s laboratory analysis of the samples discovered elevated levels of lead and copper in some samples.

EPA agrees with the USVI’s assessment that the issue is likely not originating from VIWAPA’s water treatment plant and that the water VIWAPA produces is not likely a source of the elevated lead and copper levels. More data should be available soon to help us make a determination.

EPA is strongly recommending that people on St. Croix not consume VIWAPA water from the distribution system -- whether the water is piped from the distribution system to a household cistern or piped directly from the distribution system to a household tap – until more information is gathered on the root cause of the lead.

EPA is actively working with the USVI government on ongoing follow up sampling. EPA, with VIWAPA and VIDPNR, are also planning to conduct specialized sampling, called “sequential sampling,” that will help find the root cause of the original elevated lead and copper levels. EPA will review all sampling results with the USVI governmental agencies.

EPA will continue to work closely with the USVI government to ensure that all communities are protected from any potential contamination in drinking water.

Can I drink or use the water to prepare formulas or other food?

People should **not** drink or make baby formula with water that contains levels of lead above the EPA action level.

Can I use the water to make food, such as using it with dried soup mixes or to boil rice or vegetables?

People should **not** use water with levels of lead above EPA’s action level for cooking or food prep of any kind. Do **not** use it to cook in or with drink or soup mixes.

Can I bath or shower in water with high levels of lead? Can I bath or shower my children?

Bathing and showering should be safe for you and for your children, even if the water contains lead over EPA’s action level. Human skin does not absorb lead in water. Human skin does not absorb lead from water. Even if tap water contains lead at EPA’s action level, washing your hands, bathing and showering should be safe for children and adults even if the skin has minor cuts or scrapes. Never drink bathwater, and do not allow babies and children to drink bathwater.

Children and adults should **not** drink, brush teeth, or rinse their mouths with bath or shower water.

Can I wash my food in water with high levels of lead?

Do **not** use water with levels of lead above EPA’s action level for cooking, preparing or washing food.

Can I wash dishes and utensils and clean food preparation areas with water with high levels of lead?

Water with any lead levels is safe to use to wash and sanitize dishes, tables, and eating utensils. Be sure to dry before using. Wash dishes, bottles, and toys with unfiltered soapy water. Lead is not absorbed by sealed stone, porcelain, metal or glass.

Can I do laundry and generally clean with high levels of lead?

Water with any lead levels can be safely used for general cleaning and washing of clothing, bedding, and linens. Very little water remains on washed and laundered fabrics. If lead absorbs into some types of fabrics, it still will not be absorbed by human skin. Laundered or washed items will not contain enough lead residue to pose a concern. Even if children sometimes put their sleeves or other clothing parts into their mouths, this will not hurt them.

Can my pet drink the water?

Animals should **not** drink water with lead above the EPA action level.

Who is responsible for providing drinking water in St. Croix, USVI?

The Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority provides drinking water to approximately 55-60% of the people on the island of St. Croix. The Safe Drinking Water Act regulatory authority (“primacy agency”) is the USVI Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

Does EPA know what is causing these elevated levels?

Not yet, but we conducted sequential sampling at homes with elevated lead levels to identify the source of lead. For example, brass valves in the distribution, or brass components in the distribution meters, may be sources of lead.

Could the elevated lead levels in the water be related in any way to contamination from industrial operations on St. Croix like the aluminum plant and the refinery?

EPA has no information that would indicate industrial sources as the source of elevated lead levels in the water.

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