

Chemical added to water to combat lead pipes



Thursday, August 13, 2015



By Kelly O'Brien

Reporter

Irish Water is looking to add a chemical to the water supply in Limerick to reduce the levels of lead found in the supply.



Jerry Grant, head of asset management at Irish Water, said the company will be introducing orthophosphate in the coming weeks as part of a pilot project. If the programme is successful, the organisation plans to implement it in other areas also.

Irish Water estimates 200,000 households could have lead piping. This means hundreds of thousands of people may be consuming dangerous levels of lead on a daily basis.

Even at low levels, lead may cause a range of health effects including behavioural problems and learning disabilities while prolonged exposure can adversely affect cognitive development, particularly in children under six.

While the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends lead in the water should be combated by replacing the piping, it has acknowledged adding orthophosphate to the supply could be a temporary solution.

“It’s Irish Water’s decision to go ahead with this and if they want to do that they will need to do the environmental impact assessment but I suppose the point that the EPA want to make is that this is a temporary solution,” said Darragh Page, senior inspector with the agency, speaking on RTÉ Radio One’s Morning Ireland.

“It doesn’t eliminate lead levels and because there are no safe levels of lead in your drinking water the EPA is recommending that people would replace their pipework,” he said.

The EPA confirmed the chemical orthophosphate is safe for human consumption and, if added to the water supply, would not have any effect on people’s health.

“Orthophosphate is a food-grade chemical substance that is used in the water treatment process. It’s in widespread use in places like the UK and Northern Ireland. It coats the inside of the lead pipes so that it reduces the amount of lead that can dissolve from the pipes into the water supply. It’s not 100% effective but it has been shown to reduce the lead levels in people’s drinking water,” said Mr Page.

“Studies in the UK have shown by up to 90% but it does vary from supply to supply. In some cases it will work and in other cases it won’t work.”

He said people may already be consuming orthophosphate without even knowing it. The chemical is widely used in the beverages industry and is present in various soft drinks.

However, while he said the addition of orthophosphate won’t result in health problems, it could have an environmental impact.

“Many of our inland waters have problems with nutrient enrichment and a lot of that is caused by phosphorous,” said Mr Page.

“Some of the inland waste water treatment plants where the water ultimately ends up do have phosphorous removal in place,” he said.

Séighin Ó Ceallaigh, a councillor for Limerick City East, said he had concerns about the proposal.

“This is a very serious issue, and many people have told me that they are frightened at the prospect of a new chemical in the water system,” he said.

“This government and previous governments have had the time and money to sort out the lead problem, but have failed to do so. Irish Water have the time and resources to install meters, and this should be completely diverted to fixing broken and lead pipes.”