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Are The Dangers Of Iron In Water Being Ignored?

By Sara Jerome
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Iron in drinking water may pose more health risks than federal water regulators currently acknowledge.

Marc Edwards, an environmental engineering professor at Virginia Tech, says that iron may have played a critical role in the Flint lead-contamination crisis, according to WWL-TV.

“What we’ve discovered in the last, say, five or ten years is a legitimate public health concern about having too much iron and manganese in the water,” he said. “This is part of the scientific process that this doesn’t just look bad, it poses a significant public health threat.”

Edwards helped uncover the severity of the lead crisis in Flint. He explained to WWL-TV how iron can have a negative impact on the water system.

“[Iron] increases the leaching of lead into the water,” Edwards said.

“While the iron itself won’t likely make people sick, Edwards says high iron in the water can remove disinfectants like chlorine, allowing harmful bacteria to grow. Bacteria like legionella, which causes Legionnaire’s Disease. That’s what Edwards said he believes may have happened in Flint,” the report said.

In Flint, cases of Legionnaires’ Disease have spiked in recent years, CNN reported. “From June 2014 to November 2015, at least 87 county residents developed Legionnaires’ disease, compared to between six and 13 cases in the four preceding years,” the report said, citing a public health official. At least 12 people have died, according to various reports.

These considerations may be important for towns facing high iron levels. St. Joseph, LA, is one town with major iron concerns.

The town of just over 1,200 people has discolored brown water running through its taps. “Pictures posted online of chalky, dirt-brown water in bathtubs, washing machines, and sinks present a sickening image,” ATTN reported.

WWL-TV decided to run its own tests on the water in St. Joseph. “Those independent tests confirmed the findings of the Louisiana



Department of Health and Hospitals. The water has extremely high levels of iron and manganese. One of the samples tested at more than 230 times the EPA’s recommended level for iron, .3mg/L,” the report said.

Regulators have consistently claimed that the problem in St. Joseph is a cosmetic one, not a health hazard. Louisiana’s State Health Officer Jimmy Guidry said in February, per WWL-TV: “That’s not something we regulate because it’s something for color purposes, it’s not a serious threat to your health.”

“Meanwhile, the EPA doesn’t require that states enforce the agency’s set of so-called secondary drinking water standards because high iron and manganese have not been considered health risks,” the report said.

St. Joseph is not the only town facing this challenge.

“DHH tests have shown 457 water systems across the state have had iron levels above the EPA’s recommended level. About half of them do not treat the water to remove iron, including the Slidell Water Supply, Abita Springs Water and St. Tammany Water Districts 2 and 3,” WWL-TV reported.

Sara Jerome is a contributing writer who has covered business, technology, and regulation for the Financial Times Group, the National Journal, and The Hill.

To read more about the threat of contaminants and how to combat them visit Water Online’s Drinking Water Contaminant Removal Solutions Center.

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