

Discoloured or cloudy water

Water quality factsheet 2



Discoloured water is usually caused by tiny bits of material from pipes or air bubbles trapped in your water. While it may look unpleasant, running your cold water tap for a while will normally make the water run clear.

This factsheet explains the most common reasons for discoloured water and what to do if you find your water is discoloured.

We take water quality seriously at South West Water. This is one of a series of factsheets about water quality – you can find more factsheets at southwestwater.co.uk

Why is my water yellow, orange or brown, or why does it contain dark bits?

If your water appears to be yellow, orange or brown in colour, or you find that it contains little dark bits, it's likely to be the result of rust in water pipes. The rusting discolours the water and tiny flakes of pipe material can enter the water, appearing as dark bits or an orange or brown colour when you run your taps.

How it happens

This kind of discolouration may happen without warning at any time. It's usually caused by rust particles that are loosened when there's a change in the water flow, for example when:

- there has been a burst water main
- the fire brigade is using or testing fire hydrants.

Is it harmful?

If you drink discoloured water, it's unlikely to be harmful to your health. The water is likely to contain a higher level of iron than usual and, if the water is very discoloured, it could contain other metals such as manganese. Neither iron nor manganese will cause any harm – in fact, both metals are found in a healthy diet.

However, we don't recommend using discoloured water for cooking, drinking or washing clothes as it can look and taste unpleasant.

What should I do?

Run a cold water tap that is fed directly off the mains (this is usually the cold water tap in the kitchen). Check the supply every ten minutes and if it doesn't clear within an hour, please call us. Avoid using your washing machine or dishwasher until the water is clear.

Checking whether the problem is only affecting your property

If running the cold tap doesn't clear the discolouration or if it happens again, it's a good idea to check whether the problem is affecting your neighbours too or just your property. If your neighbours have also had discoloured water, the problem may be with the main supply. Please call us and we will explain what we will do next.

If your neighbours haven't had discoloured water, it may be that the problem is with the plumbing or pipework on your property. We recommend that you ask a plumber to check your plumbing system, supply pipes and fittings.

Why is my water white or cloudy?

If your cold water appears white or cloudy, it's likely that there is air trapped in the water mains.

How it happens

Sometimes air becomes trapped in the water mains. The air dissolves in the water when it's under pressure but, once you turn your tap on and the pressure is released, tiny air bubbles are formed. This gives the water its white or cloudy appearance. We call this aeration. To test for aeration, fill a glass with water. If it clears from the bottom up, the cloudiness is caused by aeration. If it clears from the top down, the cloudiness may be caused by limescale. Limescale occurs in hard-water areas, such as East Devon, and can also give water a milky appearance, particularly when boiled.

Common causes of aeration in cold water are repair work following a burst water main, seasonal changes in water temperature and water supply valves being replaced. Aeration can also occur in your hot water system where the boiler heats the water very quickly. If it's only your hot water that appears aerated, the aeration is not caused by your water supply but by your boiler or domestic plumbing.

Is it harmful?

No. Aeration can make tastes and odours more noticeable and it can cause a white scum to form when the natural minerals in the water react with the air. However, this is harmless and aerated water is fine to drink. Aeration and discolouration often happen at the same time, as aeration can scour the lining of the mains, causing more loose metal particles in the water.

What should I do?

You don't usually need to do anything – the cloudiness will disappear in time as the air is released.

