

The Color of Water



In every water system, there are times that the water may appear discolored. This should not cause undue concern. Simply running the tap for a few minutes almost always takes care of the situation. Why will water occasionally appear discolored? What affects the way water looks?

What's in my water?

Water contains a number of naturally occurring and harmless minerals. Water also contains small amounts of iron. Although most of the iron is removed during the treatment process at the plants, a fine layer of iron sediments settles along the bottom and at the dead end of water mains. When there is any type of disruption to the distribution system such as a surge or increase in flow, a water main break or use of a fire hydrant, it can cause the sediment to become stirred into the water

When this occurs, the water entering your home may appear yellow to reddish-brown. The iron is harmless and usually settles out in several hours. If you run the water for a short time, it should clear. If it does not, call the 24-hour Emergency Dispatcher at 410 222-8400 and a crew will be sent to flush the line.

Could it be the pipes?

Discolored water can also result from old iron or galvanized steel pipes that rust over time. The Department of Public Works has several programs in place to eliminate this situation. The Water Main Clean and Line Project eliminates corrosion in unlined cast iron mains and coats the pipe walls with a thin layer of mortar. The Small Line Replacement Project replaces small diameter mains and the Water Service Line Replacement Project replaces old, galvanized water service lines on the County owned and maintained portion of your water services.

If you experience discolored water after work is completed in your area, consider replacing galvanized pipe on your property as this could be a source of low pressure or discoloration.

What about my laundry?

Iron tinted water can stain clothing. Avoid washing clothes or dishes when you experience rust-colored water. Also, avoid if possible, running hot water so that your water heater does not refill with iron-tinted water. If you notice discolored water, run the washer through a cold water rinse cycle while empty. However, if you do wash clothes which become discolored, call Emergency Services at 410 222-8400 and ask for Rust Remover. A bottle of remover will be delivered to your home and, when added to your wash, will remove the rust-colored stain from white and colored cottons and synthetics.

Why is it cloudy or milk colored?

Cloudy or milk colored water indicates air in the line. Water in the distribution system is under pressure causing any air present to be dissolved until the pressure is released at the tap. If the amount of dissolved air is low, your water may appear to sparkle or have small bubbles. If there is a greater amount of dissolved air in your water, millions of very tiny bubbles will appear when the pressure is released, giving the water a cloudy or white, milky appearance. It is, however, safe for consumption. It may take several minutes for the air to escape. As it does, the water will clear.