

Colour, taste and odour explained



Scottish Water
Trusted to serve Scotland



Scottish Water provides clear, fresh and high quality drinking water direct to your tap 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The water that we supply is required to meet the standards as laid down under The Public Water Supplies (Scotland) Regulations 2014.

Sometimes you may notice that your tap water is discoloured, contains visible particles, tastes slightly different, or even has a faint odour. These differences can originate in the raw water source within the treatment chain or within the distribution network. If you notice any unusual taste and odour, please contact us so that we can carry out the necessary investigations to resolve this matter for you as soon as possible.

This factsheet provides you with information on:

- Where we sample
- Why your water may be coloured
- Causes of discoloured water
- Why your water may sometimes taste or smell different
- Our investigation
- Sample results
- How to contact us

1 Where we sample

Water is sampled regularly at our treatment works, service reservoirs and at our customers' taps to monitor the quality of the drinking water. In addition to this, some water quality parameters are continuously monitored at major treatment works. Across Scotland laboratory tests are carried out on water samples each year for regulatory purposes. Many more samples are taken by staff for operational reasons (e.g. bursts, new mains, complaints). The percentage of all regulatory samples complying with the relevant standards in Scotland is over 99%.





2 Why your water may be coloured

The raw water drawn from surface sources in Scotland is often naturally coloured due to the catchment from where the water is taken from. The intensity of the colour can vary depending upon the season and level of rainfall. All our water is treated at our treatment works, where every effort is made to reduce this colour caused by the dissolved organic matter. Some of the treatment processes used, like slow sand filters, are not as efficient as others at reducing colour in the water. At some sites, the quality of raw water is excellent and only simple disinfection is then used to treat the water. Occasionally you may notice more colour in your water due to heavy rain in the catchment area where your drinking water is taken for treatment.

For more information on our treatment processes please see **Scottish Water Factsheet 3 Water treatment explained**.

3 Causes of discoloured water

If your water is not normally coloured or you notice some increase in colour, there could be a number of reasons for this change. Some of these are noted below for your information:

Iron and manganese

Occasionally, in northern and western parts of Scotland, a reddish-brown colour in the water is apparent and is due to high concentrations of iron and manganese. The acidic upland surface waters tend to dissolve these metals from soils and rocks in the local area. The level of iron and manganese can vary from season to season. The regulation level is set at 200 micrograms per litre for iron and 50 micrograms per litre for manganese. The permissible level is known as the Prescribed Concentration or Value (PCV).

Your tap water can also pick up iron from the inside of old cast iron mains or from your household plumbing system. As part of our commitment to improving your water, we are continually working to replace or refurbish our pipes depending upon their age and condition. As a home or property owner you're responsible for all the water pipes and facilities inside your house and all the underground pipes within the boundary of your property.

In the spring and summer months, in certain areas in Scotland, manganese may show up in your water as tiny brownish flakes or particles.

There are no known health concerns related to the presence of Iron and manganese. However if you suspect you might have problems with water discolouration caused by iron or manganese please call our **Customer Helpline** on **0800 0778778** and we will be happy to investigate it for you.

For more information please see **Scottish Water Factsheet 2 Water quality standards explained**.

White water

Some customers may experience what we call 'white water'. This happens when air gets into your household system and dissolves under pressure. When the pressure drops as you turn on the tap, air forms tiny bubbles. These bubbles will slowly float to the surface and the water will clear. If you pour a glass of water you will see it clear from the bottom upwards.

Your water is still safe to drink, however, if the problem persists, please contact our **Customer Helpline** on **0800 0778778** and we will investigate this further for you.

Blue water

Your water may sometimes appear to have a slight blue colour if it is viewed against a white background e.g. in a white bath. This may be because your water is from a high quality treatment works or is from a high quality spring or borehole with very little or no organic content (the same effect can be seen in glaciers, where these can appear blue and white). This is normal, and is typical of water free from natural colour.



Work being carried out in your area

If the water from your cold kitchen tap (or any other mains fed tap) suddenly becomes discoloured, this could be because some maintenance or repair work is being carried out on our network in your area. If we have not informed you of any work being carried out, please contact us for more details. If we are not working in your area, we will investigate the cause of discolouration for you and let you know.

Change in flow

Your water may also be discoloured if there has been a reversal of flow, for example, water redirected from a neighbouring area. There could also be a sudden increase or decrease in your flow, for example, if the Fire Service needs water to put out a fire, or a pipe has burst. This change in flow could lead to some localised disturbance of deposits within the main which may lead to some temporary discolouration. To clear, run your cold water tap for a short period of time. If the problem persists contact our **Customer Helpline** on 0800 0778778.

Storage problems

If you notice discoloured water or odour from any of your taps that are not served directly from the public water main, you may have a problem with a storage tank within your property. If you are in any doubt, please call a local registered plumber.

You should make sure that your storage tank in your house has a close-fitting lid and it is cleaned on regular basis.

Washing

If your washing has been discoloured because of the water, repeat the wash without adding fabric softener. If it is still discoloured then please get in touch with us and we will arrange to visit you.



4 Why your water sometimes taste or smell different

You may not notice, but every water supply has its own distinct taste due to its composition. This is why you may notice a difference when you travel to a different part of the country. Taste differences in water derive from salts and the presence of specific metals such as iron, copper, manganese and zinc present in the water. Some people are more sensitive to tastes and odours than others.

A chlorine smell

This comes from small amounts of chlorine that remain in your supply and is commonly called chlorine residual. For more information on why we add chlorine to your water, please see **Scottish Water Factsheet 5 Chlorine explained**.

A metallic taste

You may sometimes experience a metallic taste if your water has picked up traces of substances like copper or iron. This is more noticeable in large buildings with long lengths of pipework.

Earthy/musty smell

Some customers describe this as smelling stale or pond like. It can have several sources:

- By products of algae or harmless micro-organisms in the raw water sources. In areas where we know this is a problem, we treat the water with activated carbon or ozone.
- Long lengths of pipework within large buildings.

5 Our investigation

If you contact our Customer Helpline regarding a water quality enquiry our customer service adviser will first check to make sure your water quality enquiry is not linked to any known network activity.

If required the customer service adviser will arrange a visit from one of our customer representatives to investigate the water quality at your property.

The customer representative will start their investigation by checking the water supply at your kitchen tap or where the water first enters your property.

If a water quality issue is identified our customer representative may then undertake further investigation, the exact nature of which depends upon the specific issue, but may include:

- Flushing the water main to try and improve the water;
- Carrying out an on-site chlorine check to determine if chlorine residuals are normal;
- Taking a range of samples depending on the nature of your enquiry.



6 Sample results

If a field customer representative has taken a range of samples they will then be delivered to our laboratories for further analysis.

Within five days after the samples are taken a customer service adviser will call you to update you with some initial sample results.

Within 10-14 days of the samples being taken a scientist in our public health team will send you a detailed letter explaining the results.

For more information on Water Quality enquiries visit www.scottishwater.co.uk and download the following factsheets:

- **Factsheet 1** Your water explained
- **Factsheet 2** Water quality standards explained
- **Factsheet 3** Water treatment explained
- **Factsheet 4** Colour, taste and odour explained
- **Factsheet 5** Chlorine explained
- **Factsheet 6** Chloramination explained
- **Factsheet 7** Lead explained
- **Factsheet 8** Biofilms and staining explained
- **Factsheet 9** Manganese explained
- **Factsheet 12** Hardness in drinking water



We want to make it easy to contact us – here's how:

We always have someone here to take your call, you can write to us or alternatively you can contact us through our website.

Alternative formats of this leaflet can be made available free of charge. For information on Braille, large print, audio and a variety of languages, please contact us.

If you have a disability, medical condition or other reason where you will need additional assistance from Scottish Water then please contact us and we can add your name, address and requirements to our confidential Priority Services Register.

We record all calls for quality and training purposes.



www.scottishwater.co.uk



help@scottishwater.co.uk



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Customer Helpline **0800 0778778**

Please quote this reference code when contacting us: **SWFact CTO5 05/20**