

Tetrachloroethylene (PCE) in South Lake Tahoe

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need to filter my water at home?

No. Lake Tahoe Water suppliers test water regularly to ensure that our drinking water meets state standards. The water we provide is safe to drink. It is not necessary to filter your water at home. You can drink, prepare food, and cook with water as you normally would.

What is Tetrachloroethylene (PCE)?

PCE is a colorless liquid with a mild, chloroform-like odor. It is mostly used in the textile industry and as a component of aerosol dry-cleaning products. PCE is also commonly used in wood processing, metal degreasing, paint remover, glues and silicone lubricants. When PCE is improperly disposed of or spilled into the environment (improper disposal of materials in storm drains, spilling onto soil) the potential for water supply contamination is present. PCE will seep through the soil and eventually reach groundwater supplies.

How has PCE impacted South Lake Tahoe?

In 1989, PCE was first found in drinking water wells near the intersection of Highways 50 and 89, referred to as the South "Y". Today, the PCE remains in groundwater and forms a contaminant plume believed to cover more than 400 acres. Groundwater used by wells operated by the Lukins Brothers Water Company and Tahoe Keys Property Owners Association are currently impacted by the plume. During the 1990s, the South Tahoe Public Utility District (STPUD) installed a treatment facility to remove PCE from four drinking water wells. Today, three of the wells have been destroyed and the remaining well is currently not used. In 2009, Tahoe Keys POA installed a treatment system to remove PCE from groundwater at one of its wells. In 2014, Lukins discovered PCE in two wells and immediately stopped using them. All three drinking water systems are interconnected and the water suppliers have the ability to share water and are working together to ensure our entire community has access to reliable and safe drinking water.

How much PCE is allowed in drinking water?

In order to ensure that tap water is safe to drink, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) and the State Water Resources Control Board (State Board) prescribe regulations that limit the amount of certain contaminants in water provided by public water systems. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established a regulatory limit for PCE of 5 parts per billion in drinking water which is like 5 drops of water in an Olympic swimming pool. Drinking water standards and regular water quality testing by water suppliers are used to ensure our water is safe to drink.

How are people exposed to PCE?

PCE exposure can occur through breathing air containing PCE vapor, skin contact by using products containing PCE's, and through drinking water from a ground water source contaminated with PCE.

What are potential health impacts due to prolonged exposure to high levels of PCE in drinking water?

People with long term exposure to PCE in drinking water above the maximum contaminant level can experience adverse effects to the liver, kidneys and central nervous system. For more information on PCE health impacts, contact the State Water Resources Control Board, Division of Drinking Water.

What if I drank contaminated water before the well was shut down?

Since the discovery of PCE at the South “Y” area, South Lake Tahoe water suppliers have tested their water annually for PCE and shut down wells with PCE above the maximum contaminant levels immediately upon detection. People who drink water containing PCE in excess of the maximum contaminant level over many years may experience liver problems, and may have increased risk of getting cancer. Given the regulatory limits and regular water quality monitoring, it is highly unlikely that our customers have experienced prolonged exposure to PCE from drinking water.

How is PCE treated in drinking water?

Best available technology for treating groundwater containing PCE can be done by using an air stripping tower or activated carbon filtration. Both technologies are currently being used by water suppliers in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

How often are wells tested for PCE?

The State Water Resources Control Board requires water suppliers to test for PCE every three years and quarterly if PCE has been detected below the maximum contaminant level. South Lake Tahoe water suppliers test more frequently. Please contact your individual water supplier for further information on sampling schedules.

Who tests for PCE in drinking water?

South Lake Tahoe water suppliers take water samples from their wells and send samples to a state certified laboratory.

Where can I find water quality reports?

Water suppliers are required to make their Consumer Confidence Report available to the public upon request, which includes annual water quality data. You can find the consumer confidence report on your individual water supplier’s websites and/or by calling your water supplier.

Is it ok for my kids to drink water at Tahoe Valley Elementary School?

Yes. The water delivered to Tahoe Valley Elementary School meets all drinking water standards and is safe to drink.

Can I take a shower at home?

Yes. The water we provide meets all drinking water standards and is safe to shower in.

What is being done about PCE?

The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board is the state regulatory agency which oversees the cleanup of contaminated groundwater. Lahontan has required numerous investigations to determine the source of PCE and is working with the responsible parties to determine the total extent of their contamination. The South Tahoe water suppliers are working with Lahontan to develop and implement short-term fixes and long-term solutions to provide clean drinking water to our community. To date, the water suppliers have secured a \$500,000 grant from the State Water Resources Control Board through Proposition 1 to complete a feasibility study that will help to identify a cost-effective alternative for addressing contamination from the South “Y” Plume.

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Is there a cost being passed onto the customer to deal with PCE?

Costs passed onto customers are dependent on who supplies your water. Please contact your individual water supplier for further information on costs associated with PCE contamination.

Are there any preventative measures we can take at home or at school to prevent PCE from getting in our water?

Do not pour any chemicals onto the ground or into storm drains.

Are there other potential sites of contamination in South Lake Tahoe?

There may be. Investigations directed by Lahontan are on-going. To date, the only wells that have tested positive for PCE are located in the South Tahoe "Y" area.

Is there a possibility that South Lake Tahoe could trade groundwater rights for surface water rights to Lake Tahoe?

There is a possibility, although it would be a long process with the State Water Resources Control Board. Drawing water out of the lake would also likely require treatment and new pumping and distribution improvements, thus building and operating a surface water treatment facility would be expensive.

Food for thought

In Tahoe, historically, we have had some of the most pristine drinking water in the world. Water suppliers in South Lake are working together to ensure every drop of water that flows from your tap is safe.

For more information go to www.stpud.us/groundwater

