



Water Treatment Division 336-727-8000 cityofws.org/utilities

What is the pink stuff in my toilet, shower & dog's water dish?

Pink stains are most frequently observed in sinks, toilet bowls, shower stalls and bathtub enclosures and on showerheads, shower curtains, tile and in pet water bowls. They are caused by *Serratia marcescens*, an airborne bacterium. *Serratia marcescens* does not enter the home via the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Utilities water system, but moist surfaces provide an ideal environment for this bacterium to grow and proliferate.

Typical Source

Serratia bacteria commonly inhabit soil, dust, mulch and surface waters. While it may enter the water treatment plant in our source water, the bacteria will not survive the treatment process. Many times it appears during and after new construction or remodeling activities. More people indicate the problem occurs in the summer months when temperatures and humidity levels are higher, especially if windows are kept open for any length of time.

To grow and thrive, *Serratia marcescens* needs specific environmental conditions. This airborne bacterium requires a moist location where micronutrients accumulate and water stands long enough to lose its residual chlorine disinfectant. Sources of micronutrients include food particles, phosphorous residues from detergents, soap and shampoo in sinks, bathtubs and showers, urine and feces in toilets, and food residues in pet water bowls.

Health Effects

Serratia marcescens has been found to be pathogenic to persons who are immune-compromised by disease or medical treatment. Some species have been linked to human urinary tract infections, secondary wound infections and pneumonia. If you have concerns about *Serratia* bacteria and your specific health, please contact your physician or other health care provider.

Cleaning Recommendations

Once established, *Serratia* bacteria usually cannot be eliminated entirely. However, periodic and thorough cleaning of surfaces where the pink substance occurs, followed by disinfection with chlorine bleach, appears to be the best way to control it.

To clean pet water bowls:

- Scrub the surfaces with a brush and a household cleaner
- Use care with abrasives to avoid scratching the container, which will make it even more susceptible to the bacteria
- Disinfect the surfaces with chlorine bleach

Leave the disinfectant solution on the affected surfaces for 10-20 minutes before thoroughly rinsing away with clean water.

To control pink stains in toilets:

- Clean the bowl thoroughly and spray chlorine bleach into the bowl and under the bowl rim

- Add ¼ cup of bleach to the toilet tank
- Let bleach stand for 15-20 minutes
- Flush the toilet a couple of times to rinse the disinfectant out
- Bleach should not be left in the tank for prolonged periods or it may damage the rubber valves and seal inside

Running the bathroom exhaust fan and keeping bathtubs and sinks wiped down also helps to manage this problem.

References

American Water Works Association, Opflow Article: “What’s this Pink Stuff in my Bathroom?” November 2000

American Water Works Association, Opflow Article: “Avoiding Pink Stain Pain” April 2006

Cary/Apex Water Treatment Facility Fact Sheet. Updated August 21, 2019

Questions? Please call City Link 311 or 336-727-8000.