

Mysterious Pink Stuff

I want to thank Rosemary Malone for giving me this article she received from New Jersey American Water that I have edited and added some other observations.

In the article the question was raised by a woman in the Midwest who has a pinkish substance on her bathroom fixtures that was very persistent, appearing in the shower, sink, and along the water line of her toilet bowl. The problem seems to peek its head on a fairly regular basis. Utilities all over the United States have experienced similar problems. How to deal with it? The bottom line is that pink residue is less likely a problem associated with water quality than with naturally occurring airborne bacteria and is also affected by the homeowner's cleaning habits. The bacteria produces a pink film and sometimes a dark gray film, on surfaces that are regularly moist, including toilet bowls, showerheads, sink drains, and tiles. The problem also more commonly occurs in humid regions of the country. To determine the exact species of bacteria would require lengthy and costly laboratory testing and for those reasons most homeowners are reluctant to have the tests performed. Although the exact species of bacteria is not known, most experts have concluded that the pink staining is most likely from the bacteria *Serratia marcescens*. These bacteria thrive on moisture, dust, and phosphates and are widely distributed having been found naturally in soil, food, and also in animals. The conditions for the survival of *Serratia marcescens* are minimal and the bacteria may even feed upon itself in the absence of other nutrients. Members of the *Serratia* genus were once known as harmless organism that produced a characteristic red pigment. Because of this, scientists and teachers frequently used it in experiments to track other microbes. More recently, *Serratia marcescens* has been found to be pathogenic *to some* people, having been identified as a cause of urinary tract infections, wound infections, and pneumonia and is no longer recommended for use in school experiments. Many times the pinkish film appears during and after new construction or remodeling activities. The dirt and dust stirred up from the work probably contains *Serratia* bacteria.

Once airborne, the bacteria seek moist environments to proliferate. Some people have even noticed the pink residue in their pet's water bowl which causes no apparent harm and can be easily cleaned off. Others have indicated that their experience with this nuisance occurs during a time of year that their windows are open for the majority of the day. These airborne bacteria can come from any number of naturally occurring sources and the condition can be further aggravated if customers remove the chlorine from the water by way of an activated carbon filter.

What to Do

Short of buying pink fixtures, the best solution to keep these surfaces free from the bacterial film is continual cleaning. A chlorinous compound is best, but use care with abrasives to avoid scratching the fixtures, which will make them even more susceptible to bacteria. Chlorine bleach can be periodically stirred into the toilet tank and flushed into the bowl itself. As the tank refills, more bleach can be added. Three to five tablespoons of fresh bleach should be all that is necessary. A toilet cake that contains a disinfectant can keep a residual in the water at all times. The porous walls of a toilet tank can harbor many opportunistic organisms. Cleaning and flushing with chlorine will not necessarily eliminate the problem, but **will** help to control these bacteria. Keep bathtubs and sinks wiped down and dry to avoid this problem. Using a cleaning solution that contains chlorine will help curtail the onset of the bacteria. We have a walk in shower with a tiled floor, walls and ceiling. I had remembered seeing that pink mold along the caulking line some long time back but it had been gone for a long while. I questioned our cleaning whiz, Maria, who keeps our place spic and span every week and she told me something very interesting. She cleans the shower tile with Tilex and if she sees a spot on the grout or caulking that is stubborn she lays a paper towel that is wet with the Tilex against that area for ten to fifteen minutes while she does something else. But here's the good part, after she is done and the shower is dry, she sprays the wall tile and the caulking with Endust! Not the floor as it would get too slippery. Now why would this work? I'm not a chemist but the way I figure it, the Endust keeps air away from the area and the mold can't live or even get at the

caulking. I don't really know why, but I know it works. As far as the toilet bowl goes, you are on your own. The brush, a couple of times a week, with some bowl cleaner does it for us though.

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