

What is the Pink Stuff in my Toilet, Shower or Pet's Dish?

Serratia marcescens Bacteria Fact Sheet

Each year, a few customers call us to ask about a slimy pink substance that sometimes forms in moist areas around their homes. They most frequently observe it in toilet bowls, on surfaces in shower stalls and bathtub enclosures, on tiles, in sinks, and in pet water dishes.

A red or pink pigmented bacteria known as *Serratia marcescens* is thought to be the cause of the pink "stuff". *Serratia* bacteria are common inhabitants of our environment and can be found in many places, including human and animal feces, dust, soil, and in surface waters. The bacteria will grow in any moist location where phosphorous containing materials or fatty substances accumulate. Sources of these substances include soap residues in bathing areas, feces in toilets, soap and food residues in pet water dishes. Many times, the pinkish film appears during and after new construction or remodeling activities. Others have indicated the pink "stuff" 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 their water by way of an activated carbon filter. *Serratia* can also grow in tap water in locations such as toilets in guest bathrooms where the water is left standing long enough for the chlorine residual disinfectant to dissipate. *Serratia* will not survive in chlorinated drinking water.

Serratia marcescens is not known to cause any waterborne diseases. Members of the *Serratia* genus were once known as harmless organisms that produced a characteristic red pigment. 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 in hospital environments.

Once established, periodic and thorough cleaning of all surfaces where pink stuff occurs, followed by disinfection with chlorine bleach. The right air treatment product can help reduce the chances of the bacteria from returning. 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.

References

American Water Works Association, Opflow Article: Question of the Month, page 3,
Water Quality Bulletin, Woodinville Water District,