



US Environmental Protection Agency
Water Resource Center RC-4100
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Washington DC 20460

**Is my
water
safe
to drink?**

This brochure helps elected officials
and community leaders of small
drinking water systems respond to
local residents who ask....

**is my water
safe to drink?**



The 1996 Amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act require drinking water systems to provide their customers with information they need to know that their drinking water is safe. Most drinking water system customers will receive – or have already received – in the mail a report card on the safety of their drinking water called the Consumer Confidence Report (CCR). Customers of some small and very small systems may not receive a CCR directly, but will read this information in public notices published in local newspapers.

However, the CCR may not only provide information on water quality, but may also cause concern among some customers and raise questions about their drinking water supply among other community residents. This brochure answers some questions they may ask, helps explain some of the terminology used in the CCRs, and identifies resources for additional information for answering the question...

is my water safe to drink?

Key terms to remember

- **Aquifer** - an underground geological formation containing water
- **Monitoring Waiver** - an agreement with the state, or in some cases federal, government that allows a community to monitor the quality of its drinking water less frequently or to forgo monitoring for a particular contaminant
- **Maximum Contaminant Level** - the highest level allowed by law of a particular contaminant in drinking water delivered to users of a public water system
- **Risk Assessment** - a measurement of the actual or potential harm of a particular contaminant in drinking water delivered to users of a public water system
- **Safe Drinking Water Act** - the set of federal laws and regulations that sets national drinking water standards, practices, and guidance for safeguarding drinking water supplies and human health.

The Consumer Confidence Report for my system showed traces of some contaminants but said my water is safe. Is it?

All drinking water has some trace contaminants. Some “naturally occurring” substances may actually improve the taste of your water and could have nutritional values. Sometimes contaminants in your drinking water are not naturally occurring contaminants, but are “man-made” contaminants like pesticides. The trace levels reported in your CCR are probably not harmful. Removing all contaminants from your drinking water would be very expensive and is not necessary to protect your health.

How does the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) decide what contaminants need to be regulated and what amount of each contaminant should be allowed in my drinking water?

EPA uses a process called risk assessment to set drinking water standards. They have issued maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for more than 80 contaminants. EPA assesses the cancer and non-cancer risks for the average person from exposure to a contaminant in their drinking water. MCLs are also based on known or anticipated threats to your health, the ability of your water system to remove the contaminant from your drinking water, and the cost of the water treatment.

Some people like nursing mothers and infants, children, transplant patients and people with weakened immune systems may be more sensitive to contaminants in drinking water even at levels less than the MCL.

To meet the MCLs your water system may use any state-approved treatment. Sometimes for certain contaminants EPA may not set an MCL but will require use of a particular treatment technique to protect the safety of your drinking water.

Can something like the Woburn, Massachusetts, pollution incident described in the book and movie A Civil Action happen in our community?

It is possible but less likely today. This is because the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), first passed in 1974 and recently strengthened and

re-authorized in 1996, requires all public water systems to monitor for TCE (trichlorethylene, a common solvent) the major pollutant causing health problems in the Woburn wells.

If TCE is detected, even in minute amounts, the new Consumer Confidence Report regulation requires your water system to report it in understandable ways to all customers.

What should I do if I suspect there is something wrong with my drinking water?

Call your water system and ask the water system owner or operator if there have been any violations of National Drinking Water Standards and, if so, ask him or her to describe the nature of the violation. If the water is substandard or has been in violation, ask about potential health effects and what has been done to eliminate or minimize the health risk. Your water system may have a monitoring waiver for certain contaminants. If so, find out why.

What if my water comes from a private well?

If your water supply is a private well, call your county health department for information about testing your water for chemical and/or microbiological contamination. Private wells should be tested regularly. Testing should be done as soon as possible if anyone in the family is experiencing chronic gastrointestinal disorders, or other unexplained health problems.

Private well owners can get more information on how to protect their drinking water source and wells from the Ground Water Foundation 1-800-858-4844.

If I find out that my water has quality problems, what are my options?

Most importantly, try to find out about the source of the contamination and what is being done to prevent the contamination from recurring. Most water systems work hard to fix the problem, if possible. For example, E-coli problems might require your water system to disinfect water lines. For more information, contact EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 800-426-4791.



How often do people get sick from bad drinking water?

One of the problems is that no one knows for sure. Researchers think that water-related illnesses are under-reported in the general population and that truly major problems are the only ones that get attention.

Some illness is acute—meaning that drinking the water will make you sick right away. Generally, acute illness is not serious and goes away with time. Individuals who are young, old, immune suppressed, or pregnant and nursing may be especially vulnerable to severe effects that can develop over a period of time. There are a host of diseases that researchers now believe may be caused, at least in part, by exposure to environmental toxins over a long period of time. It makes sense to minimize exposure to toxins whenever possible, and to be especially cautious about children because of their smaller body size and developing organs. EPA's Office of Children's Health Protection has developed some important information about health impacts on children such as their increased vulnerability to illness as a result of exposure to common health contaminants such as lead and pesticides.

What about the communities that had increases in leukemia and other illnesses due to water pollution? Can that happen here?

There have been other "leukemia clusters" like the one described in A Civil Action. However, unlike the one described in the book, it is rare for a cause and effect to be established. After Woburn and other documented cases of exposure to toxins such as the dioxin exposure in Times Beach, Missouri, both the government and private sector have moved more quickly to prevent further exposure. In addition, in several parts of the Midwest, statistical linkages or correlations have been established between exposure to certain pesticides and Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Call for your water system or health department for more information.

What can I do to protect my loved ones and myself?

There are several things you can do. First, learn where your drinking water source is. Source waters can be from surface water like rivers and streams or groundwater found underground in aquifers. Get involved in EPA's Source Water Assessment Program (SWAP). SWAP

means learning all you can about your drinking water supply. It also means determining what local land-uses, facilities, and practices threaten source water supplies and doing all you can both personally and politically to minimize their impact on drinking water safety.

Then, if you get your water from a public water system, contact your water system's owner or operator with any concerns you may have. Or if you get your water from a private well, make sure the well is located safely away from potential contaminants and that the well is properly constructed, maintained, and closed if not in use. Your local well driller and the National Groundwater Association are good sources of information about well depth and maintenance.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your drinking water system owner and operator for more information on your drinking water. You can also contact your local or county health department. Other sources of information on drinking water are:

- EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline
1-800-426-4791
- The Groundwater Foundation
1-800-858-4844

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