

Facts About **DRINKING WATER**

*U.S. Environmental Protection
Agency, Region III
1650 Arch Street
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**EPA Region III Customer
Service Hotline
Providing Information
to the Public
1-800-438-2474**

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974 - 1999). Over the past 25 years, the number of Americans served by public water systems has increased tremendously. Today many Americans take safe and plentiful drinking water for granted. Much of this confidence is well deserved, but more remains to be done to protect drinking water.

Throughout the year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) along with many supporters nation-wide will work to focus the country's attention on the importance of safe drinking water. Efforts will include increasing awareness about the need to better protect our sources of drinking water and involving communities in plans to improve drinking water quality.

This brochure answers some frequently asked questions about drinking water.

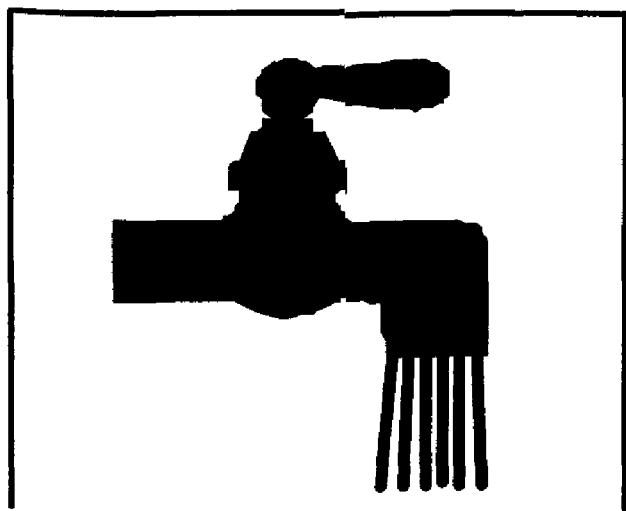
Q: What contaminants does EPA regulate in drinking water?

A: EPA regulates over 80 contaminants in drinking water. Some states may choose to set stricter standards, however, all states must have standards at least as stringent as EPA's.

Q: Is my drinking water safe to drink?

A: The United States enjoys one of the best supplies of drinking water in the world.

Sometimes water has an unpleasant smell or taste, because of certain treatment or local conditions; nonetheless, tap water that meets EPA and state standards is considered safe to drink. However, some water suppliers do not meet all applicable standards. To find out if your drinking water supplier complies with federal and state standards, contact your local water supplier. The number should be on your water bill, or in your local phone book. You can also check with your state drinking water agency. If you are concerned about a specific contaminant in your water supply, EPA has prepared fact sheets for consumers on most of the contaminants which are regulated.



Q: Where does my drinking water come from?

A: Drinking water sources vary even within communities. Nationwide, approximately 53 percent of all drinking water comes from ground water sources (wells), with the remaining 47 percent coming from surface water sources (rivers, lakes, and reservoirs).

**Q: Where can I get my water tested?
Will EPA test my water?**

A: EPA does not test individual homes, and cannot recommend specific labs to test your drinking water. However, States are required to certify water testing labs. You may call your State Certification Officer to get a list of certified water testing labs in your state.

Q: Should I install a home water treatment kit even if my water company already treats the water?

A: Some people may wish the additional protection of home water treatment. If your water company has already treated the water, there is generally no need for you to further treat it, except perhaps if your water company or local health organization tells you that a health level has been exceeded or if your water has taste or odor problems. If you do purchase a home water treatment unit,

be certain to follow the manufacturer's instructions for operation and maintenance, especially changing the filter on a regular basis.

People with compromised immune systems may have special needs.

It is easy to forget that our drinking water doesn't just come from a tap or a bottle. The water that we drink comes from streams, rivers, lakes or from ground water wells that tap underground aquifers. Protecting these sources is very important for a community's drinking water. Increased population and development, and the discovery of new sources of contamination present new challenges for drinking water safety.

Communities can get involved in local source water protection programs aimed at preventing contamination of drinking water sources and reducing costs for treating water to make it safe. Call your local water authority to find out how you can participate.

Q: How do I know if my home water treatment kit is a quality product?

A: EPA does not regulate water treatment kits and cannot recommend one brand over another. No one unit takes out every kind of drinking water contaminant; you must decide which type best meets your needs. For help in picking a unit, you may call two independent, non-profit organizations for more information: NSF International (800-673-8010) tests and certifies home water treatment units, and the Water Quality Association (708-505-0160) classifies units according to the contaminants they remove as well as listing units that have earned its approval. In addition, you may read EPA's pamphlet *Home Water Treatment Units: Filtering Fact From Fiction*.

Q: What do I do in an emergency to disinfect my drinking water?

A: When the home water supply system is interrupted by natural or other forms of disaster, you can obtain limited amounts of water by draining your hot water tank or by melting ice cubes. In addition, vigorous boiling of water for one minute will kill any disease-causing organisms that may be present in the water. The flat taste of boiled water can be improved by pouring it from one container into another, by allowing it to stand for a few hours, or by adding a pinch of

salt. You must store disinfected water in clean, tightly-covered containers not subject to corrosion. Keep water covered and refrigerated after disinfecting.

Q: I want the safest possible water. Is bottled water safer than tap water?

A: Bottled water is not necessarily any safer than your local drinking water. EPA regulates public water systems to ensure that they are in compliance with national standards; bottled water is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration as a food product. Both agencies use equivalent health standards to ensure safety. If you want the safest water possible, then boil your water for one minute, whether it is tap water or bottled water. NSF International, an independent non-profit organization, certifies some brands of bottled drinking water. To find out which brands it certifies, call NSF at 1-800-673-8010.

Q: My house has a well. How do I know if my well water is safe to drink?

A: Private water supplies should be tested annually for nitrate and coliform bacteria to detect contamination problems early. Test more frequently and for more potential contaminants, such as radon or pesticides, if you suspect a problem. Call your state

certification officer for a list of certified testing labs in your state. In addition, you can help protect your water supply by carefully managing activities near the water source.

The organization

Farm*A*Syst/Home*A*Syst provides fact sheets and worksheets to help farmers and rural residents assess pollution risks and develop management plans geared towards their circumstances.

Q: How will I know if there is lead in my water? Am I at risk?

A: Lead is found almost everywhere: in food, paint, dust, soil, air and even drinking water. Lead is rarely in drinking water when it leaves the treatment plant. Instead, it leaches into the water from some plumbing in buildings, especially older buildings that still have lead pipes. (Lead is no longer allowed as a component of pipes and plumbing fixtures, as of August 1998.) Children and pregnant women are most susceptible to health risks from lead in drinking water. EPA recommends that all homes should be tested. To have your water tested, EPA recommends you find an independent state certified laboratory using EPA approved methods. To find out what certified labs are in your area, call your state certification officer.

Q: How can I reduce my exposure to lead in drinking water?

A: There are several actions you can take to reduce the amount of lead in your drinking water.

- "Flush" the cold water faucet by allowing the water to become cold before using it.

- Never cook with or consume water from the hot water tap (hot water dissolves lead more quickly than cold water).

- Purchase a certified home treatment unit to remove lead from your water.

- Purchase lead-free bottled water for drinking and cooking.

- Replace the faucets in your home with ones that do not contain lead.

- **DO NOT BOIL THE WATER:** boiling will only increase the concentration of lead in the water.

Q: How can I help protect the drinking water in my community?

A: There are several things you can do to protect drinking water in your community. Drinking water protection should be a community-wide effort, beginning with protecting the source of your local water supply, and including education, funding, awareness, and conservation. Many

communities have already established source water protection programs. Call your local water supplier to find out if your community participates. You can also support efforts to improve operation, maintenance, and construction of water treatment processes.

**For more information about
drinking water, call EPA's
Safe Drinking Water
Hotline at:
1-800-426-4791**

**Q: My community has issued a boil
water alert. What does that mean? How
long will it last?**

**A: Under the provisions of the Safe Drinking
Water Act, water systems that serve more
than 25 people are required to test their water
regularly for a wide variety of contaminants.
If your system has issued a boil water alert,
it has likely discovered one or more
microbiological**

contaminants at levels exceeding those allowed by EPA. Even though there may be no danger, the boil water alert is a temporary advisory to protect your health. Your system must take appropriate corrective action, continue to monitor its water supply, and notify customers when it has remedied the problem. The length of the alert will depend on the nature of the problem. Your local utility can provide you with more details, or you can learn more yourself by checking the consumer fact sheets provided by EPA to educate the public about possible drinking water contaminants.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: For more information, call the Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791, or explore EPA's Office of Ground Water and Drinking Water home page at: <http://www.epa.gov/ogwdw/wot/ontap.html>. In addition, you may wish to call your state drinking water office (EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline can provide you with the proper phone number).

Q: What is a consumer confidence report?

A: Beginning this year, water utilities must provide regular reports to their customers on the quality of their drinking water. These "consumer confidence" reports will tell families where the water comes from, potential sources of contaminants and possible health effects, and whether the water meets federal health standards. Many water systems will be posting these reports on the Internet as well.

