

Frequently Asked Questions About Boil Water Advisories

PURPOSE

This list includes questions most often asked during boil water advisories. This information was developed from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), water system, and primacy agency materials. The content was adapted to help water systems provide customers with clear and concise information and actions to take.

Water systems are encouraged to use this information as a guide to help create their own fact sheets and other communication materials. Recommendations may vary depending on the circumstances and severity of water contamination. Select specific questions that are appropriate for each advisory situation.

This information is for Tier 1 Public Notices. For a waterborne disease outbreak, consult with local and state public health authorities to adapt the information.

While there are no federal regulations requiring boil water advisories, local authorities are responsible for issuing boil water advisories.

DIRECTIONS

- Brackets [] indicate places to insert specific information, such as the water system name, health department information, or the contaminant.
- Limit fact sheets for customers to one page front and back.
- Refer to the fact sheets from the “Tools and Templates” in Section 1 and Section 2 of this toolbox for additional topics.

Use the Q&As to develop scripts or fact sheets for water system staff, especially customer service and field crews. Uses include:

- Briefing materials for public health departments and other partners
- Media kits and updates
- Customer fact sheets
- Websites and online tools

Bottled Water

Should I drink bottled water during an advisory?

Yes. If bottled water is available, that is the best option until officials say otherwise. If you do not have bottled water available, the next best option is to boil your tap water to make it safe to drink.

Boiling Water

I do not have bottled water available for drinking. How do I boil my water to make it safe to drink?

- Fill a pot with water.
- Heat the water until bubbles come quickly from the bottom of the pot to the top.
- Keep heating the water for one more minute.
- Turn off the heat source and let the water cool.
- Pour water into a clean, sanitized container with a cover for storage.

I don't like the taste of boiled water. What can I do?

To improve the taste of boiled water you can:

- Pour cooled, boiled water back and forth from one clean glass or container into another to add air to the water, or
- Let the water stand for a few hours, or
- Add a pinch of salt to each quart of boiled water.

Why do I have to boil my water?

Your water [may be, is] contaminated by [bacteria, virus, protozoa, parasite]. Contamination [may be, is] due to [equipment failure, leaking/broken pipes in the system, insufficient disinfectant in the water supply]. The boil water advisory gives you information so you can take action to protect your health.

Disinfecting Water

I do not have bottled water for drinking and I cannot boil my water to make it safe to drink.

How do I disinfect my water to make it safe to drink?

Caution: *Water contaminated with fuel or a toxic chemical will not be made safe by boiling or disinfection. Use another source of water if you know or suspect that your water might be contaminated with fuel or a toxic chemical.*

You will need a clean, sanitized container to store any water you disinfect. We recommend you clean and sanitize your container before you start to disinfect your water by following these steps:

1. Wash the storage container with dishwashing soap and water and rinse completely.
2. Sanitize the container with a solution made by mixing 1 teaspoon of unscented household bleach (bleach that does not have an added scent) in one quart (32 ounces, 4 cups, or about 1 liter) of water.

3. Cover the container and shake it well so that the sanitizing bleach solution touches all inside surfaces of the container.
4. Wait at least 30 seconds and then pour the sanitizing solution out of the container.
5. Let the empty sanitized container air-dry before use OR rinse the empty container with clean, safe water that is available already.

Note: *When preparing safe water, it is best to use food grade water storage containers, such as those found at surplus or camping supply stores.*

If you are not able to use a food grade water storage container, be sure the container you choose:

- Has a top that can be closed tightly
- Is made of durable, unbreakable materials (i.e. not glass)

DO NOT USE containers that previously have been used to hold liquid or solid toxic chemicals (bleach, pesticides, etc.)

To disinfect your tap water

If the tap water is clear:

- Use unscented household bleach (bleach that does not have an added scent). The label should say that it contains 5-9% of sodium hypochlorite.
- Add 8 drops (using a medicine dropper) or 0.5 milliliters of bleach to 1 gallon (16 cups) of water.
- Mix well and wait 30 minutes or more before drinking.
- Store disinfected water in a clean, sanitized container with a cover.

If the tap water is cloudy:

- Filter through a clean cloth
- Use unscented household bleach (bleach that does not have an added scent). The label should say that it contains 5-9% of sodium hypochlorite.
- Add 16 drops (using a medicine dropper), 1 milliliter, or 1/8 teaspoon of bleach to 1 gallon (16 cups) of water.
- Mix well and wait 30 minutes or more before drinking.
- Store disinfected water in a clean, sanitized container with a cover.

Food and Beverages

Can I use my coffee maker, ice machine, or water or soda dispenser?

Do not use water from any appliance connected to your water lines. This includes the water and ice dispensers in your refrigerator/freezer. Most kitchen and other household water filters typically do not remove or kill all bacteria or viruses.

- Use bottled, boiled, or disinfected water to make coffee and ice.
- When the boil water advisory is lifted, consult the owner's manual to find out how to sanitize appliances.

Can I use ice from my refrigerator/freezer?

- Do not use ice from ice trays, ice dispensers, or ice makers.
- Throw out all ice made with tap water.
- Make new ice with bottled, boiled, or disinfected water.

What should I do about preparing food and beverages? How should I wash fruit, vegetables, and food preparation surfaces?

- Wash fruits and vegetables with bottled, boiled, or disinfected water.
- Use bottled or boiled water that has cooled to cook food.
- Use bottled, boiled, or disinfected water when preparing drinks, such as coffee, tea, and lemonade.
- Wash food preparation surfaces with bottled, boiled, or disinfected water.

What should I do about feeding my baby?

Breastfeeding is best. Continue to breastfeed. If breastfeeding is not an option:

- Use ready-to-use baby formula, if possible.
- Prepare powdered or concentrated baby formula with bottled water. Use boiled water if you do not have bottled water.
- Wash and sterilize bottles and nipples before use with bottled or boiled water.
- If you cannot sterilize bottles, try to use single-serve, ready-to-feed bottles.

How do I wash dishes during a boil water advisory?

Use disposable plates, cups, and utensils, if possible. If you do not have disposable dishes, follow the instructions below.

Household dishwashers generally are safe to use. If possible, set your dishwasher so it is using a hot water rinse or sanitizing cycle.

To wash dishes by hand:

- Wash and rinse the dishes as you normally would using hot water.
- In a separate basin, add 1 teaspoon of unscented household liquid bleach for each gallon of warm water.
- Soak the rinsed dishes in the water for at least 1 minute.
- Let the dishes air dry completely before using them again.

Health

I already drank the water. Will I get sick?

Most people who happen to drink this water will not get sick. If you do get sick, the symptoms are similar to food poisoning: nausea, diarrhea, cramps, and possibly a mild fever.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

The most important thing to do is avoid dehydration. Drink plenty of fluids and avoid drinks with caffeine, such as soda, coffee, and tea. If you are concerned about your health or the health of a family member, contact your healthcare provider or [\[local health department\]](#).

Household Information

Note: Some of the answers related to pet health may need to be customized once the nature of the contaminant or chemical is known and its effects on animal health is determined.

Should I give my pets boiled water?

Yes. Pets can get sick from the same contaminants as people. It is a good idea to give them bottled, boiled, or disinfected water. Boiled water should always be cooled before using.

Do I need to worry about my fish or aquatic pets (e.g., reptiles, frogs)?

Most germs that infect people do not infect reptiles or fish. If your water system is using more chlorine or changing disinfection, be cautious about changing the water in your fish tank or aquarium. Standard aquarium operations require removal of chlorine and chloramines, which can be toxic to fish and reptiles.

Contact your local pet store or veterinarian for more information.

Is it safe to water my garden and house plants?

Yes, you can use the tap water for household plants and gardens.

Is it safe to let my children play in a kiddie pool filled with tap water?

No. Due to the high chance that children will get water in their mouth while playing in a kiddie pool, we recommend that you avoid using your kiddie pool during the boil water advisory.

What [\[microbe, organisms, germs, bacteria\]](#) might be in the water?

Many types of microbes could be in the water. Water systems are concerned about bacteria such as shigella, viruses such as norovirus, and parasites such as *Cryptosporidium*.

Human illness from these microbes is usually caused by eating raw or undercooked food, ingesting contaminated recreational or other untreated water, or poor hand-washing. Diarrheal illness from these microbes is not usually life threatening, except in the elderly, the very young, or those with weak immune systems. If you are concerned, consult your healthcare provider or contact [\[local health department\]](#).

Hygiene

Can I use tap water to wash my hands?

In many situations, you can use tap water and soap to wash your hands. Follow the guidance of your local public health officials or emergency managers. Be sure to scrub your hands with soap and water (warm or cold) for 20 seconds and rinse them well under running water. It is important to dry hands completely with a towel or by letting them air dry.

Can I use tap water to brush my teeth?

No. Use bottled water or boiled water that has cooled to brush your teeth.

Is it safe to take a shower or bath?

Yes, it is safe to take a bath or shower, but be careful not to swallow any water. Use caution when bathing babies and young children. Consider giving them a sponge bath to reduce the chance of them swallowing water.

What about shaving?

Yes, you can shave as usual.

What about doing laundry?

Yes, it is safe to do laundry as usual.

For more information, see or contact:

- [Creating & Storing an Emergency Water Supply](#): CDC provides guidance on the amount of water needed for good health, as well as how to prepare and store safe water before and during an emergency.
- [Hygiene, Handwashing, & Diapering](#): CDC provides guidance on recommended hygienic practices when water is not available or is contaminated.
- [A Guide to Water Filters](#): CDC maintains a guide for choosing filters that remove pathogens, chemicals, or toxins.
- EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline: 1-800-426-4791
- [Ground Water and Drinking Water](#): EPA provides information and guidance about drinking water quality, emergencies, contaminants, public health issues, and treatment and storage.
- Water system: [name, title, phone, e-mail, website]
- State or local public health department: [name, title, phone, e-mail, website]
- Primacy Agency: [name, title, phone, e-mail, website]