

Boil Water Notices - Frequently Asked Questions for Residents and Homeowners

Protecting your family, yourself and others from potentially contaminated drinking water takes some thought and effort. Questions from residents and homeowners about how to do this often arise during a boil water event. The following pages provide answers to some questions you may have. In the event that a "Do Not Use" notice is issued, additional precautions will be needed, contact your local Health Department for guidance.

Boil Water Notices - Frequently Asked Questions for Residents and Homeowners - Short Version is also available for download. (PDF, 148Kb, 2pg.)

Questions

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Answers:

Q1 - Why was a boil water notice issued for my water?

A boil water notice is issued by water utilities or health agencies as a precaution to protect consumers from drinking water that may have been contaminated with disease causing organisms (also called pathogens). Boil water notices are typically issued when an unexpected condition has caused a potential for biological contamination of water in a public water system. Common reasons for a boil water notice include loss of pressure in the distribution system, loss of disinfection, and other unexpected water quality problems. These often result from other events such as water line breaks, treatment disruptions, power outages and floods.

The reason for your boil water notice should be included in the notification. Your water utility and your local Health Department office can also answer questions you may have about why a boil water notice was issued for your water supply, and what to do.

Q2 - How long will the need to boil water continue?

Public notification will be given when the boil water notice is lifted. Your water utility and your local Health Department office can also give you details on how long your boil water notice might last and will advise you when it is safe to return to normal water use.

Typically a boil water event lasts for 24 to 48 hours, but this can be longer and the need to boil water may last for several days or more. How long depends on the conditions that caused the need to boil, how quickly the conditions can be corrected, and how long it takes for laboratory results to confirm that your water is again ready to drink.

Q3 - How do I boil my water so that it is safe to drink?

Bring water to a **FULL ROLLING BOIL for 1 MINUTE**, then allow the water to **COOL BEFORE USE**. Because water may take 30 minutes to cool, plan ahead. Make up a batch of boiled water in advance so you will not be tempted to use it hot and risk scalds or burns. Boiled water may be used for drinking, cooking, and washing.

Here's an easy way to remember...ROLL for ONE then COOL.

Q4 - Does my in-home water treatment system provide enough protection?

No! The Department of Health does not encourage residents to rely on home treatment units. It is recommended that you use boiled (and then cooled) water or an alternate source such as bottled water that is certified for sale in New York State. Most in-home treatment devices are not designed to remove pathogens, and should not be relied on to protect you during a boil water event. Even treatment units that are designed to remove pathogens may not do so all the time unless they have been properly maintained. Common home treatment devices that have limited or no ability to remove pathogens include: carbon filters; water softeners and other ion exchange units; sediment filters; chlorine removers; and aerators.

Q5 - What if I have a reverse osmosis treatment unit on my faucet or house?

A properly operating reverse osmosis (RO) unit can remove pathogens, including viruses, bacteria and protozoa. However there are many units available to the public through hardware stores and elsewhere, not all of which can be relied upon to remove pathogens. Furthermore, RO units must be diligently maintained to assure effective treatment. If you are at all uncertain of the capabilities of your reverse osmosis unit, do not rely on it to remove potentially harmful pathogens. Instead, you should use boiled (and then cooled) water or water from an acceptable alternate source.

Q6 - What if I have a water pitcher/dispenser with a filter?

Most of these units are not capable of removing pathogens, including viruses, bacteria, and protozoa. The few that are designed to do so, may still require disinfection to address viruses and must be properly operated and diligently maintained to ensure effective treatment. It is recommended that you use boiled (and then cooled) water or an alternate source such as bottled water that is certified for sale in New York State.

Q7 - Are there any other ways to disinfect my water so that it is safe to drink?

Boiling and bottled water are the most reliable means to ensure safe potable water during a boil water event and should always be your first choices. However, in extended emergencies such as an area wide power outage, potable water that needs no further treatment may be supplied by your water utility or local emergency response agency from a tanker truck or a water trailer called a water "buffalo".

There are also disinfection methods using ordinary household chemicals that homeowners can use if needed. These can be found in several publications, including the State Department of Health pamphlet "Don't Be Left in the Dark", also available through your local Health Department.

CAUTION - Chemical disinfection is limited in effectiveness and is not appropriate for very turbid (muddy) water, or where raw sewage or other fecal matter may be present. In this case only use an alternate source of water.

Q8 - What is an acceptable alternate source for safe drinking water?

Acceptable alternate sources for drinking water include:

- Bottled water that is certified for sale in New York State
- Water from another public water supply (one that is not under the boil water notice)
- Water from a New York State (NYS) certified bulk water hauler
- Water from a water tanker or water "buffalo" that is provided by your water utility or by emergency response agencies.

Roadside springs are not a sure source of safe drinking water. They are seldom monitored and no one is in charge of keeping them safe. If you must use roadside spring water for drinking or food preparation, we recommend that you boil (and then cool) it before use.

Q9 - Is it safe to use bottled water?

It is safe to use bottled water that is certified for sale in New York State. Such water may be used for drinking, cooking, and washing with no further treatment. Bottled water may be preferable when boiling is not possible or is inconvenient. It is always a good idea for consumers to keep an emergency supply of bottled water on hand for just such a use.

Q10 - What is the shelf life/expiration date for bottled water?

Many manufacturers advise a two year period for taste, but bottled water can be used indefinitely if stored properly. The International Bottled Water Association advises consumers to store bottled water at room temperature (or cooler), out of direct sunlight and away from solvents and chemicals such as gasoline, paint thinners and dry cleaning chemicals.

Q11 - Is it safe to use water from a water tanker?

Bulk water is not as convenient as bottled water, but can be a much welcomed and safe alternate water source, and in extended emergencies may be provided to you at no charge.

Water provided by a New York State certified bulk water hauler can be used for drinking, cooking, and washing with no further treatment. You may also rely on water from a tanker operated by your water utility or by an emergency response agency such as the NY State Office of Emergency Management. Depending on the boil water event, tankers may be set up as temporary water stations in your community where you can fill containers for home use.

If you arrange for bulk water on your own, you should ask the hauler to verify that:

- the bulk hauler is certified in New York State (you can ask for their certification number),
- the water to be delivered is from a source that is approved by the Health Department, or from another public water supply that is not under the boil water notice, and
- water will be transported in a sanitized water tanker (certified haulers have standard procedures for this).

A list of New York State certified bulk water haulers can be obtained from NYS-Certified Bulk Water Facilities web page.

Q12 - What container should I use to obtain water from another location?

The container you use to get water from an alternate source or temporary water station can greatly affect your water. Never use a container that has ever held a chemical, gasoline or other fuel. Use only clean containers that you know are fit and that are free of all dirt and contaminants.

Q13 - Can I use my water for cooking?

No, any water used for food preparation or cooking needs to be from an acceptable alternate source or boiled first.

Q14 - What if I am boiling my water as part of the cooking process?

It is more protective to boil the water first, to prevent the potential for inadequate heating. The cooking process should bring the water to a full rolling boil for at least one minute before adding the food item (for example, making pasta). If the water will be at a slight boil for a long time, then this will also be protective. For example, you may be cooking beans or boiling chicken for 10 - 20 minutes.

Q15 - How should I wash fruit and vegetables and make ice?

Fruits, vegetables, and any other foods that will not be cooked should be washed and rinsed with boiled (and then cooled) water or water from an acceptable alternate source. Similarly, ice should be made with either boiled water or water from an acceptable alternate source.

Q16 - Can I use my water for making baby formula or drinks?

No, not without precautions! Any water used for baby food, formula, or making beverages must be boiled (and then cooled) or be from an acceptable alternate source.

Q17 - Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing dishes?

Hand-washed dishes: No! Use boiled (then cooled) water, water from an alternate source, or after washing with dish detergent rinse for a minute in a dilute bleach (1 tablespoon of unscented bleach per gallon of water). Allow dishes, cutlery, cups, etc. to **completely air dry** before use.

Home dishwasher: Yes, if the hot wash is at least 170o F and includes a full dry cycle. However, most home dishwashers do not reach this temperature. If you are uncertain of the temperature of your dishwasher, rinse in dilute bleach and **completely air dry** as described for hand washed dishes.

Commercial dishwasher: Yes, if it is a NSF listed washer and manufactured and operated with a heat sanitizing rinse set at 170oF that lasts for at least 30 seconds. Additional information on commercial dishwashers can be found in the fact sheets for food service establishments.

CAUTION - "Green" or "Environmentally Friendly" dish washer additives, which may be advertised as a disinfectant or anti-microbial, are weaker disinfectants and should not be relied on alone to eliminate potential pathogens.

Q18 - Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing clothes?

Yes, unless a "Do Not Use" notification has been issued, it is safe to wash clothes in tap water as long as the clothes are completely dried before being worn. However, increased turbidity that sometimes occurs during a boil water event may discolor clothing, especially whites.

Q19 - Can I brush my teeth with the water without boiling it?

No! Any water you ingest or place in your mouth should be disinfected by boiling (and then cooled) or come from an alternate source. Bottled water is excellent for brushing your teeth.

Q20 - Is potentially contaminated water safe for bathing and shaving?

Unless a "Do Not Use" notification has been issued, your water may be used by healthy individuals for showering, bathing, shaving, and washing as long as care is taken not to swallow water and avoid shaving nicks.

To minimize the chance of infections, people with open wounds, cuts, blisters or recent surgical wounds and people who are immunocompromised or suffer from chronic illness should use boiled water (then cooled) or water from an alternate source*. Children and disabled individuals should be supervised to ensure water is not ingested. Sponge bathing is advisable, and bathing time should be minimized to further reduce the potential for ingestion.

Q21 - How should I wash my hands during a boil water notice?

Generally, vigorous hand washing with soap and your tap water is safe for basic personal hygiene. If you are washing your hands to prepare food, you should use boiled (then cooled) water, bottled water, or water from another acceptable source for hand washing.

If a "Do Not Use" notification has been issued (as example, when sewage or chemical contamination is present), your water should not be used for any purpose, including personal hygiene. Only water from an acceptable alternate source should be used instead.

Q22 - Should I use hand sanitizing lotion or wipes?

Hand sanitizing wipes alone are not enough, especially to clean your hands for making food. Alcohol based sanitizers work against some common germs (like *E. coli*, and *Salmonella*) but may not be effective for cryptosporidium and bacterium spores.

Q23 - Is the water safe to give to my pet?

To be certain, give them water that has been boiled then cooled or water from an acceptable alternate source. Many pets regularly drink some pretty bad water, but pets come in a wide variety with variable resistances to pathogens. Many pets are vulnerable to the same diseases that humans can get from contaminated water and can spread these diseases into the environment or pass them on to their owners. More specific information may be available from your veterinarian, based on the actual animal and conditions for the boil water notice.

Q24 - Does a boil water notice affect how I can use my toilets?

There is no need to disinfect water used for flushing. Unless a "Do Not Use" notice was issued, or a water conservation notice was issued along with the boil water notice, there is no restriction or concern about using your toilet.

Q25 - What if I have already consumed potentially contaminated water?

The likelihood of becoming ill is low. However, illness is certainly possible, especially for people that have a chronic illness or may be immunocompromised. This is why boil water notices are issued.

Anyone experiencing symptoms of gastroenteritis, such as diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, with or without fever, should seek medical attention. These symptoms are not unique to exposure to potential contaminants/organisms in the water, and a doctor's involvement is key to identifying the cause of your illness. If your doctor suspects a waterborne illness, you may be asked to provide blood and/or stool samples.

Q26 - What infectious organisms might be present in contaminated water?

There are many possible water borne pathogens. The organisms of concern in New York State include protozoa such as *Giardia* and *Cryptosporidium*; bacteria such as *Shigella* and *E. coli*; and viruses.

These organisms primarily affect the gastrointestinal system, causing diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea, and vomiting, with or without fever. Sometimes, these illnesses are contracted by ingesting contaminated water, and in some circumstances skin contact could also lead to infection. Most of these illnesses are not usually serious or life threatening except in the elderly, the very young or those who are immune compromised.

Q27 - What should homeowners do when the boil water notice is lifted?

- Flush household pipes/faucets first: To flush your plumbing, run all your cold water faucets on full for at least 5 minutes each. If your service connection is long or complex (like in an apartment building) consider flushing for a longer period. Your building superintendent or landlord should be able to advise you on longer flushing times.
- Automatic ice makers: Dump existing ice and flush the water feed lines by making and discarding three batches of ice cubes. Wipe down the ice bin with a disinfectant. If your water feed line to the machine is longer than 20 feet, increase to five batches.
- Hot water heaters, water coolers, in line filters, and other appliances with direct water connections or water tanks: Run enough water to completely replace at least one full volume of all lines and tanks. If your filters are near the end of their life, replace them.

- Water softeners: Run through a regeneration cycle.
- Reverse Osmosis (RO) units: Replace pre-filters, check owner's manual.
- Replace other water filters, as they are disposable and may be contaminated. This applies especially to carbon filters and others that are near the end of their life.

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