BOIL WATER EVENTS

Frequently Asked Questions from Residents and Homeowners

Questions from residents and homeowners often arise during a boil water event. The following pages have answers to these questions:

Questions:

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Answers:

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

The reason for a boil water notice should be included in the notification issued to inform the public about the boil water event. 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.

A boil water notice is usually 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 used when an unexpected condition has caused a potential for biological contamination of water in a public water system. Common reasons for a Boil Water Order/Notice include loss of pressure in the distribution system, loss of disinfection, and unexpected water quality problems. These often result from other events such as water line breaks, treatment disruptions, power outages and floods.

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

Public notification will be given to inform you 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 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 safe to drink.

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

Boiling water is a sure method you can use at home to kill harmful waterborne bacteria, viruses and parasites. Bring water to a **FULL ROLLING BOIL** for **1 MINUTE**, then allow the water to **COOL BEFORE USE**. Because water may take 20 or 30 minutes to cool, plan ahead. Make up a batch or two 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.

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 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 for the removal of pathogens, even when properly operated, and should not be relied on to protect you during a boil water event. Common home treatment devices that have limited or no ability to remove pathogens include carbon filters, water softeners and 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 properly operated and diligently maintained to ensure 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/dispensor 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", available through your local health department or on the Department's website at: http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/emergency/flood/

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?

Acceptable alternate sources of drinking water may include:

- Water from another public water supply (one that is not operating under a boil water notice)
- Bottled water that is certified for sale in New York State
- Water from a New York State certified bulk water hauler
- Water provided in a State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) tanker

Roadside springs are **not** a sure source of safe drinking water, since they are seldom monitored and no one is in charge of keeping them safe. If you do 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 very 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 bottle 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 bulk water provider?

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 that is provided from a State Emergency Management Office (SEMO) tanker or from a New York State certified bulk water hauler will be safe for drinking, cooking, and washing with no further treatment. Depending on the specifics of a boil water event, temporary water stations may be set up by your water utility, local government agency or county emergency response agency. In these cases, the water provided will be from an approved source and there will be oversight of the water delivery operation to assure the water is safe for your use.

If you arrange and receive bulk water on your own, verify that the bulk hauler is certified in New York State. Also ask the hauler to verify that the water being delivered is from a source that has been approved by the Health Department, or from another public water supply that is not operating under a boil water notice. Also ask the hauler to verify that the water was transported in a dedicated water tanker and is safe for consumption. A list of NY State certified bulk water haulers is available online at:
http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/water/drinking/bulk_bottle/bulkwter.htm

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

The container that you use to get water from an alternate source, such as a bulk water tanker, can significantly impact the water quality. Never use containers that have been used at any time to hold or transport any chemical, gasoline or other fuel. Use only clean containers that you know are safe for use and 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 (example making pasta). But if the water will be at a slight boil for a long time, like when cooking beans or boiling chicken for 10 - 20 minutes, then this will also be protective.

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. 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, this is not recommended. Any water used for food preparation or making beverages must be boiled first or be from an acceptable alternate source.

Q17 - Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing dishes?

Hand-washed dishes: Yes, if rinsed for a minute in dilute bleach (1 tablespoon 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 170^{o} F, and includes the dry cycle. Not all dishwashers reach this temperature. If you are uncertain of the temperature of your dishwasher, rinse in dilute bleach for one minute as described above for hand washed dishes. Allow dishes, cutlery, cups, etc. to **completely air dry** before use.

Commercial dishwasher: Yes, if it is a NSF listed washer and manufactured and operated with either a hot wash (170^{o}) at least 8 minutes in duration or uses a disinfectant rinse.

CAUTION - “Green” or “Environmentally Friendly” dish washer rinse 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.

Q19 - 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, and washing, so long as care is taken not to swallow the water.

Children and disabled individuals should have their bathing supervised to ensure water is not ingested. Sponge bathing may be advisable, to further reduce the potential for ingestion. The time spent bathing should be minimized.

Though the risk of illness is small, individuals with open wounds, blisters/sores, recent surgical wounds, are immunocompromised, or are suffering from chronic illness may want to consider using boiled water (then cooled) or water from an acceptable alternate source for bathing, skin cleansing and shaving until the boil water order/notice is lifted.

Q20 - How should I wash my hands during a boil water notice/order?

Generally, vigorous hand washing with soap and your tap water is safe for basic personal hygiene. If you are washing your hands in association with food preparation, 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.

Q21 - 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 having been boiled (and then cooled) or be from an acceptable alternate source. Bottled water is excellent for brushing your teeth.

Q22 – Is the water safe to give to my pet?

Maybe, to be safe give them boiled then cooled water or water from a safe alternate source. Pets come in a wide variety with variable resistances to pathogens, but some pets are vulnerable to the same diseases from contaminated water that humans can get. Pets could then pass these diseases on to their owners. More specific information may be available from your veterinarian, based on the actual animal and conditions for the boil water event.

Q23 - Should I use hand sanitizing lotion or wipes?

Alcohol based sanitizers work against some common disease causing agents (e.g. E. coli, salmonella, and campylobacter), but may not be effective for cryptosporidium and bacterium spores. Hand sanitizing wipes should not be relied on alone, especially to clean your hands for making food.

Q24 - Does a boil water order/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?

If someone has consumed potentially contaminated water from a public water system, or even from their own private well, 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 order/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 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 5 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.
- Water softeners: Run through a regeneration cycle.
- Reverse Osmosis units: Replace pre filters, check owners manual.
- Replace other water filters, as they are disposable and may be contaminated. Especially carbon filters and others that are near the end of their life.