

Water Contamination Emergencies

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

If your home is served by a public water system, and the water in the system is ever contaminated, you will be notified by the City of Kalamazoo or by the Kalamazoo County Health & Community Services Department (KCHCS). In a water emergency, the water supplier may issue a Boil Water Advisory or a Boil Water Order. Advisories and Orders will be widely publicized in local radio and television broadcasts and newspapers.

What is a Boil Water Advisory?

A Boil Water Advisory warns residents their **drinking water may be contaminated**. Often, breaks that occur, particularly in the winter season, in a water main or a complete loss of pressure in a significant part of the water system may require a Boil Water Advisory due to the possibility of contaminants entering into the water main while the repair is being completed. Routinely, water mains are thoroughly flushed, chlorinated, and sampled after completion of the repair. While an advisory is in effect, affected residents should boil water for at least one minute prior to drinking or other ingestion.

What is a Boil Water Order?

A Boil Water Notice informs people their **water is contaminated**. To protect themselves, affected residents must heat their water to a rolling boil for at least one minute prior to drinking or other ingestion.

Why boil water?

Boiling water kills dangerous disease-causing organisms, called bacteria.

How long should I boil the water?

Bring water to a **full rolling boil for at least one minute**. Allow the water to cool. Then improve the water's taste by moving it from container to container a few times.

What if I lose power and can't boil my water?

Treat it with unscented household bleach (4 to 6 percent solution). Mix eight drops (1/8 teaspoon) of bleach with each gallon of water. Shake to combine, and let the solution stand for 30 minutes before using it. The water may taste slightly of chlorine, but it is safe to drink with just this small amount of bleach.

Is bottled water safe?

Yes, if it's from a reliable, known source.

Do filters on faucets, refrigerator dispensers and pitchers keep water safe from contamination?

No. Most filters and home style treatment units do not eliminate bacteria. Once an advisory or notice has been lifted, residents should flush out all plumbing lines and fixtures with running water and replace all water filters.

Can I use ice from the refrigerator/freezer ice machine?

No. The ice may be contaminated. **Throw it out**. Turn off the ice maker. After the advisory has been lifted, run three cycles of the ice maker, discarding the ice.

Is it safe to wash dishes, cups and utensils in my dishwasher?

No. Most household dishwashers cannot heat the water to a temperature high enough to kill bacteria.

Will my coffee maker render water safe?

No. Water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit, and coffee machines do not get hot enough to hold water at a rolling boil for at least one minute. Only use the coffee machine with boiled water, bottled water from a known source, or treated water.

How should I wash fruits and vegetables?

Fruits and vegetables should be washed with boiled then cooled water, treated water, or bottled water from a known source.

Can I wash my hands with tap water?

Hand washing with soap and tap water may be safe for basic hygiene. But when washing hands before handling food, follow with use of an anti-bacterial hand sanitizer.

Can I use tap water to take a bath or shower or for shaving?

Yes. But take care not to swallow water or get it in your eyes, nose or mouth. Young children should be supervised when bathing. People who have fairly recent surgical wounds, open cuts or sores, or a compromised immune system may want to use bottled water or previously boiled then cooled water.

Can I brush my teeth with tap water in a water emergency?

No. Use only boiled then cooled water, bottled water, or treated water.

Is it ok to give my pets tap water?

No. Give them boiled then cooled water or bottled water. Pets such as dogs and cats can catch some of the same diseases from contaminated water that humans can get. Pets could pass these diseases on to their owners.

Can I use the tap water to water my plants?

Yes.

Who is most at risk for illness from microorganisms in contaminated water?

Anyone could become ill. However, the very young, the very old, and people who have weakened immune systems are most affected.

What are the health risks?

The health risks are hard to estimate. The risk could be low if no actual contamination occurred or very high if pathogens are present.

What if I have already consumed water that may be contaminated?

Don't panic. The possibility of becoming ill is relatively low. However, if you experience symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, or abdominal cramps — with or without fever — you should seek medical attention.

How will I know when the danger has passed?

The City of Kalamazoo or KCHCS will publicize the news when advisory or notice has been lifted. Depending on the type and severity of the water main break, for example, it will usually take 24 to 48 hours for a laboratory to determine if the water is safe after repairs have been made. Additional information can be found at, http://www.michigan.gov/deq/0,1607,7-135-3306_3338-199484--,00.html, "Guidelines for Issuing Boil Water Advisories to Address Potential Microbial Contamination Water Supplies"