



# Public Notification Frequently Asked Questions For Customers of a Public Water System

(Version 1, October 2019)

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***Q. I am not quite sure what a drinking water advisory is, can you please explain?***

**A.** EPA regulation requires public water systems (PWS or system) to notify consumers to potential health risks from violations of drinking water standards or situations which could lessen the quality of water being distributed.

***Q. Why was a boil water advisory issued for my water?***

**A.** A boil water advisory 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 advisories 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 advisory include loss of pressure in the distribution system, loss of disinfection, detection of bacteria through sampling and other unexpected water quality problems. These often result from other events such as water main breaks, treatment disruptions, power outages and floods.

The reason for your boil water advisory 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 advisory was issued for your water supply, and what to do.

***Q. Will the boil water advisory affect everyone or just my portion of town?***

**A.** Boil water advisories may affect the entire water system distribution system or only certain areas of the system dependent upon the specific situation. You should carefully read through the entire advisory to see what portions of the water system's distribution system are affected, as it will give you the exact details as to which sections of town should boil their water. If you are still unsure contact your water system directly.

***Q. How long will the need to boil water continue?***

**A.** Public notification will be given when the boil water advisory is lifted. Your water utility and your local Health Department office can also give you details on how long your boil water advisory 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.

***Q. How do I boil my water so that it is safe to drink?***

**A.** Bring water to a FULL ROLLING BOIL for 1 MINUTE, then allow the water to COOL BEFORE USE. Water may take 30 minutes to cool, please plan ahead. Make up a batch of boiled water in



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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.

***Q. Does my in-home water treatment system provide enough protection?***

**A.** No. It is not encouraged for 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 Jersey. 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.

***Q. What if I have a reverse osmosis treatment unit on my faucet or house?***

**A.** A properly operating reverse osmosis (RO) unit can remove pathogens, including viruses, bacteria and protozoa. However, there are many units available to the public which can not 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 RO 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.

***Q. What if I have a water pitcher/dispenser with a filter?***

**A.** 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 Jersey.

***Q. Are there any other ways to disinfect my water so that it is safe to drink?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. What is an acceptable alternate source for safe drinking water?***

- A.** Acceptable alternate sources for drinking water include:
- Bottled water that is certified for sale in New Jersey
  - Water from another public water supply (one that is not under the boil water advisory)
  - Water from a New Jersey certified bulk water hauler
  - Water from a water tanker.



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***Q. Is it safe to use bottled water?***

**A.** It is safe to use bottled water that is certified for sale in New Jersey. 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.

***Q. What is the shelf life/expiration date for bottled water?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. Is it safe to use water from a water tanker?***

**A.** 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 Jersey 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 NJ 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 Jersey,
- 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 advisory, and
- water will be transported in a sanitized potable water tanker (certified haulers have standard procedures for this).

***Q. What container should I use to obtain water from another location?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. Can I use my water for cooking?***

**A.** No, any water used for food preparation or cooking needs to be from an acceptable alternate source or boiled first. This would include water used for ice.

***Q. What if I am boiling my water as part of the cooking process?***

**A.** 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



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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.

***Q. How should I wash fruit and vegetables and make ice?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. What should I do with the ice in my freezer after a Boil Water Advisory has been issued by my water company?***

**A.** If you have an automatic ice maker, you should dump existing ice and once the advisory has been lifted, 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.

***Q. Can I use my water for making baby formula or drinks?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing dishes?***

**A.** 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 212° 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 212 °F 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.

***Q. Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing clothes?***

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



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***Q. Can I brush my teeth with the water without boiling it?***

**A.** No. Any water you ingest or place in your mouth should be disinfected by boiling (and then cooled) or come from an alternate source, such as bottled water.

***Q. Is potentially contaminated water safe for bathing and shaving?***

**A.** Unless a "Do Not Use" notification has been issued, your water may be used by healthy individuals for showering, bathing, shaving, and washing if 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.

***Q. How should I wash my hands during a boil water advisory?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. Should I use hand sanitizing lotion or wipes?***

**A.** 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.

***Q. Is the water safe to give to my pet?***

**A.** To be certain, give them water that has been boiled then cooled or water from an acceptable alternate source. Many pets are exposed to a variety of pathogens; and therefore, may be more resistant. However, 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 advisory.

***Q. Does a boil water advisory affect how I can use my toilets?***

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



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## **Q. What if I have already consumed potentially contaminated water?**

**A.** 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 advisories 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.

## **Q. What infectious organisms might be present in contaminated water?**

**A.** There are many possible water borne pathogens. The organisms of concern in New Jersey 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.

## **Q. What should customers do when the boil water advisory is lifted?**

**A.** When a boil water advisory is lifted, customers should:

- 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.