



Center for Drinking Water Quality

Questions and Answers About *E. coli* and Fecal Coliform Bacteria in the Water Supply and Boil Water Notices

When *E. coli* is found in my drinking water, what does that mean?

The Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) monitors drinking water throughout the state through regular testing. Sometimes water testing finds *E. coli*/ fecal coliform bacteria in the drinking water supply. *E. coli* and fecal coliform bacteria indicate that the water may be contaminated with human or animal wastes. Drinking water with these wastes can cause short-term illness, such as diarrhea, cramps, nausea, headaches, or other symptoms. They may pose a special health risk for infants, young children, and people with severely compromised immune systems. If this happens, your water system will issue a boil water notice. A boil water notice lets people know that they should boil their water for at least one minute, or used bottled water, for drinking, cooking, food preparation, making ice, brushing teeth, bathing children, and washing dishes. In addition, infants and young children should not be bathed in this water because they may accidentally swallow it.

If my water systems tell me my water is contaminated, should I get it tested? There is no need to get your water tested. A water test at your house will only tell you what is in your water at that specific point in time. It won't tell you what else is in the larger water distribution system. Therefore, the water testing needs to be conducted on the entire system, as it has been.

What will happen to me if I drink this water?

Almost everyone who drinks this water will be fine and will have no symptoms at all. Those people who do develop symptoms may suffer nausea, diarrhea, cramps, and possibly a mild fever. These symptoms are very much what you would expect from a case of food poisoning. If you get these symptoms, you should wash your hands frequently and avoid dehydration. Call a doctor if an infant or elderly person develops these symptoms or if you have a weakened immune system. You should also call a doctor if you have diarrhea and any of the following symptoms:

- Fever over 101.5° F, measured orally.
- Blood in the stool.
- Prolonged vomiting that prevents keeping liquids down (which can lead to dehydration).
- Signs of dehydration, including a decrease in urination, a dry mouth and throat, and feeling dizzy when standing up.
- Diarrheal illness that lasts more than 3 days.

Could I get Hepatitis from the water?

It is possible to get Hepatitis A from drinking contaminated water. The symptoms include jaundice (yellowing of the skin). Hepatitis A is not fatal and no specific medical treatment is required. If you are concerned, contact your doctor.

How long will this problem with the water last?

During a boil water notice, the water system needs to investigate the cause of the contamination and fix the problem. Then they need to do a series of tests to ensure there are no more bacteria in the water. As soon as RIDOH is assured that the water is safe, we will lift the boil water order and the water system will issue a public notice.

Can I wash my clothes while there is a boil water notice?

Yes.

Can I wash my dishes?

Dishwasher – using a dishwasher with a sanitizing cycle is recommended; if a dishwasher does not have a sanitizing cycle, wash your dishes by hand following the information below.

Hand washing of dishes – wash in warm, soapy tap water; rinse in pre-boiled or bottled water.

What if I drank the water already?

If you develop any symptoms, follow the above recommendations. Make sure you use only pre-boiled or bottled water for drinking, cooking, food preparation, making ice, brushing teeth, bathing children, and washing dishes until you are told the water is safe.

Can I shower or take a bath in the water?

Yes, as long as you don't swallow the water. Infants and young children should not be bathed in this water because they might swallow some accidentally. To prevent this, bathe your children with pre-boiled or bottled water or give them sponge baths using only a small amount of water.

There is no problem with bathing nursing home or elderly patients unless there is any possibility of them swallowing the water. Patients with open sores should not be bathed even under normal conditions.

Don't use swimming pools as a substitute for bathing. Tap water is safer.

Can I water my grass or garden?

Yes, but wash fruits and vegetables in pre-boiled or bottled water before eating them.

Can my pets drink the water?

Pets are not affected by contaminated water in the same way as humans; however, if you are concerned, out of an abundance of caution you can give your pet boiled or bottled water.

How do I know what water system I get my water from?

RIDOH does not have customer lists by water system. Your water bill (or your landlord's water bill) will tell you the water system that serves your household.

COOKING AND FOOD PREPARATION TIPS

Use pre-boiled water for all preparation of food. If food is to be cooked in water, boil the water first for more than one minute.

FILTERS do not remove *E. coli* fecal coliform bacteria.

ICE MACHINES, VENDING MACHINES, or SODA DISPENSERS that are directly connected to the water supply cannot be used.

COFFEE MACHINES directly connected to the water supply cannot be used unless they are able to heat water to boiling and hold it for at least one minute before making the coffee. Bottled or previously boiled water may also be used.

Tap water can be used for:	Use boiled water for:	Caution
Washing clothes	Washing food	Filters do not remove the bacteria
Dishwasher with sanitizer	Cooking food	Water from ice, coffee and vending machines directly feeding from water supply
Showers (adults & older children)	Bathing infants/toddlers	
Toilets	Drinking	Alcohol does not kill bacteria
Watering outside	Rinsing dishes done by hand	
Pets	Making ice cubes	
Cleaning surfaces	Brushing teeth	
	Infant formulas	

Call the Center for Drinking Water Quality main line at 401-222-6867, Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 4 p.m. if you have any questions. After hours and on weekends, call RIDOH’s emergency line at 401-276-8046.