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# ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet

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## Frequently Asked Questions About Boil Orders

This document is to provide guidance to consumers of a public water system under a boil order.

### WATER USAGE

#### Why must I boil my water?

A boil order has been issued to your water system because either recent testing has shown the presence of organisms that could cause illness, e.g., fecal or *E. coli* bacteria, or technical/physical problems in the water system have significantly increased the possibility of bacterial contamination.

#### How can I make my water safe?

Boiling the water is the best way to ensure that it is free of illness-causing organisms. Bring water to a boil, maintain a rolling boil for at least one minute. Store the water in clean, covered containers (sanitize if in doubt about the cleanliness of the containers, refrigerating if possible). If you do not want to boil your water, you can disinfect it by adding 5 drops (almost 1/8 teaspoon) of unscented bleach without other additives per gallon of clear tap water (common household bleach contains 8.25% sodium hypochlorite). If the tap water is cloudy, filter water with a clean cloth and add 10 drops (almost 1/4 teaspoon) of bleach. Containers can be sanitized by thoroughly rinsing interiors for at least 30 seconds with a mixture of 1 teaspoon bleach in 1 quart of water before pouring out.

#### Water filters

Boil tap water even if the water is filtered. Most filters **do not** remove bacteria or viruses.

#### Can I use bottled water?

Buying bottled water may be a feasible alternative to boiling water. Bottled water operations are routinely inspected, and samples are routinely analyzed to ensure they meet health standards.

#### During a Boil Order, can I use my untreated tap water for ...?

Drinking	No
Ice cubes	No, and existing ice cubes should be thrown out. See below for information on ice machines.
Brushing teeth	No
Baby's formula	No, see further information on next page.
Washing produce	No
Preparing food	No

Coffee, tea, lemonade, etc.	No. See further information on next page.
Laundry	Yes
Watering grass or garden	Yes, but fruits/vegetables must be washed using pre-boiled or bottled water before consumption.
Washing hands	See below.
Showers or baths	See below.
Washing dishes	See below.

**Can I wash my hands using tap water?**

It is recommended that you wash your hands using soap and either bottled water or pre-boiled water. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer may also be used.

**Can my family take showers or baths using tap water?**

Adults may continue to shower as long as no water is swallowed. Sponge baths are recommended for children using a clean supply of water if possible. After you bathe or shower, wash your hands in chlorinated or bottled/boiled water.

People with open wounds or who are immuno-compromised should avoid showering in contaminated tap water.

**Can I wash dishes using tap water?**

You may use a dishwasher if it has a sanitizing cycle. If it does not have a sanitizing cycle, or you are not sure if it does, you may hand wash dishes and utensils by following these steps:

- Wash the dishes as you normally would.
- As a final step, immerse the dishes for at least one minute in lukewarm water to which a teaspoon of bleach per gallon of water has been added.
- Allow the dishes to completely air dry.

**Can I use my coffee maker, ice machine, water or soda dispenser?**

None of these devices should be used if they are directly connected to your water supply. Also, filters are unacceptable for removing bacteria. Once you have been notified that the boil order has been lifted, these devices should be cleaned and sanitized according to the operator’s manual for the device. Food establishments should refer to the [Emergency Action Plan for Retail Food](#) on the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services website.

**Feeding babies**

Breastfeeding is best. Continue to breastfeed. If breastfeeding is not an option:

- Use ready-to-use baby formula, if possible.
- Prepare powdered or concentrated baby formula with bottled water. Use boiled water if you do not have bottled water. Disinfect water for baby formula if you cannot boil your water (see above for directions on how to use bleach to disinfect water).
- Wash and sterilize bottles and nipples before use.
- If you cannot sterilize bottles, try to use single-serve, ready-to-feed bottles.

**Can I give my pets tap water?**

Although pets are not normally affected by the same diseases as humans, caution suggests giving pets pre-boiled or bottled water.

## HEALTH-RELATED INFORMATION

### Who can be affected?

Anyone who ingests contaminated water may become ill. Infants, young children, the elderly and people with severely compromised immune systems are more at risk of illness.

### What are the symptoms of water-borne illness?

Disease symptoms may include diarrhea, cramps, nausea and possible jaundice and associated headaches and fatigue. Symptoms may appear as early as a few hours to several days after infection, averaging 3 to 4 days; and may last more than two weeks. These symptoms, however, are not just associated with disease-causing organisms in drinking water; they may also be caused by a number of other factors. If you are ill with these symptoms, contact your health care provider.

### What if I drank water already?

There is nothing you can do about the exposure you have already received. If you become ill, contact your health care provider. Follow the above recommendations about using your water until you are told the water is safe again.

**A note about *E. coli* bacteria:** *E. coli* is a sub-group of the fecal coliform bacteria group present in humans. Most *E. coli*, are harmless, but some can cause illness. *E. coli* outbreaks receive much media coverage. Most outbreaks have been related to food contamination (not water) caused by a specific strain of *E. coli* known as *E. coli* O157:H7. When a drinking water sample is reported as "*E. coli* positive," it does not mean that this specific strain is present and in fact, it is probably not present. However, it does indicate recent fecal contamination. Boiling or treating contaminated drinking water with a disinfectant destroys all forms of *E. coli*, including O157:H7.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### How long will the Boil Order remain in effect?

Each boil order situation is different making it impossible to predict how long the boil order will remain in effect. It will not be lifted until testing shows that the water meets public health standards. NHDES will notify the water system when the boil order can be lifted, and the water system, in turn, will notify you.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact the Drinking Water and Groundwater Bureau (DWGB) at (603) 271-2513 or [dwgbinfo@des.nh.gov](mailto:dwgbinfo@des.nh.gov) or visit [des.nh.gov](http://des.nh.gov).

- For personal medical questions, contact your health care provider.
- For additional general health information, contact NH Disease Control at (603) 271-4496.
- For specific information about your particular water system, contact the water system representative. If you do not know the phone number, DWGB staff can assist you.
- For general information concerning situations that may result in the issuance of a boil order, search the NHDES website for "WD-DWGB-4-8 Boil Water Advisories."
- For general information concerning coliform bacteria (including fecal and *E. coli* bacteria), search the NHDES website for "WD-DWGB-4-1 Coliform Bacteria in Drinking Water."
- For general questions about drinking water quality call the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791 (M-F, 10am-4pm).

- For additional information on *E. coli* bacteria, see the [Center Disease Control website](#).

Note: This fact sheet is accurate as of July 2019. Statutory or regulatory changes, or the availability of additional information after this date may render this information inaccurate or incomplete.