

Flooding & Power Failures

Drinking Water, Wells & Septic Systems

The Fairfax County Health Department urges residents that depend on wells and septic systems affected by flooding to take extra precautions to protect their health.

Wells & Septic Systems

Wells

- People who rely on private wells for their water should consider their well contaminated if it was submerged or they believe it is possible the well became submerged during the storm.
- If the well was flooded and underwater, the water should not be consumed until bacteriological testing indicates the well is not contaminated. Two samples taken on consecutive days are recommended. Contact your local health department for information on where to have samples tested.
- If you are unsure if the well was flooded, assume that it was and use another water source until the safety of the well is confirmed. Disinfect your well by adding household bleach mixed with water to the well. The recommended amount of bleach varies depending on the amount of water in the well; however a gallon of unscented bleach should be adequate for most home wells. To be certain that your water lines have been disinfected, turn on the faucets until a chlorine smell is detected. Turn off the faucets and allow the bleach to sit in the well for at least twelve hours (overnight is preferable). The water should then be turned on until the chlorine smell dissipates.
- Water must be tested after this is done to ensure that the chlorine has destroyed bacteria. Heavy or continual contamination may not be controlled by a single chlorine treatment
- Until the well water is confirmed to be safe, water used for drinking, brushing teeth or cooking or preparing food should be either bottled water or water that has been boiled for a minimum of one minute.

Septic Systems

- If flooding of a property with a septic system occurred, the system may have a damaged or failing onsite sewage system. The system should be checked to determine if erosion has occurred or the

system has been damaged. If any part of the system is exposed or appears damaged have your septic tank professionally inspected and serviced. Signs of damage include settling or an inability to accept water. Most septic tanks will not be damaged by flooding since they are below ground and completely covered. However, septic tanks and pump chambers can fill with silt and debris, and must be professionally cleaned.

- If the septic system has been flooded, sewage can back up into the home. This is more than just a serious nuisance. Sewage contains disease causing microorganisms. When cleaning up be sure to wear gloves, disinfect contaminated surfaces with diluted bleach water, and thoroughly wash yourself and your clothing immediately after cleaning.
- If there is an electrical outage, septic systems utilizing pumps will not function. A continued use of water in the home could lead to a sewage backup. Water usage in the home should be held to a minimum until the electrical power is restored.
- If the system is acting sluggish, this may be a normal reaction to saturated soils around the drainfield. Sewage leaving the septic tank may not be able to seep into the ground because the soil is already saturated. After a major rainfall event, it may take several days for the soils to drain and allow your system to return to normal. When the system is sluggish due to saturated soil around the drainfield, simply pumping the tank may not provide any improvement.
- **Remember: Whenever the water table is high or your sewage system is threatened by flooding there is a risk that sewage will back up into your home. The only way to prevent this backup is to relieve pressure on the system by using it less.**



What to Do During a Boil Water Advisory

Why was I advised to boil my tap water?

- if tests show that harmful microorganisms could be present in the water
- if the water pressure drops due to equipment failure or power outages
- because of water main breaks or repairs
- if the water source has been flooded
- during other situations that warrant special action to protect consumers' health

How does boiling make my tap water safe?

Boiling the water kills microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses or protozoans that can cause disease. Boiling makes the tap water microbiologically safe.

How long should I boil the water?

Bring tap water to a full rolling boil, let it boil for one minute, and let it cool before using.

Can I boil water in the microwave?

Tap water can be boiled in the microwave in a microwave-safe container, provided that the water reaches a full rolling boil for one minute. Place a microwave-safe utensil in the container to keep the water from superheating (heating above the boiling point without forming steam or bubbles).

Do I have to boil the tap water used to make beverages?

Yes. Boil all of the tap water you use for making coffee, tea, lemonade or any beverage made with water. In addition, all tap water used for making ice for consumption must be boiled.

Should I boil the tap water used to make baby formula?

Yes. Only use boiled tap water or bottled water for mixing formula for your baby.

Do I need to boil water before using it to wash vegetables that will be eaten raw?

Yes. Boil all of the tap water you use for washing raw vegetables.

Should I boil the tap water used in cooking?

All tap water used in cooking must first be boiled for one minute, unless the cooking process involves boiling for one minute or more.

Do I have to boil my dish-washing water?

No. Adding a tablespoon of household bleach such as Clorox to a sink full of tap water should be sufficient to treat the water used for washing dishes. Bleach should also be added to the water used for rinsing dishes. Allow dishes and utensils to air dry before reuse. You may wash dishes in an electric dishwasher, but be sure to use it with its heating elements turned on. After washing in an electric dishwasher, dishes should be rinsed in water with a tablespoon of bleach added, and allowed to air dry before reuse.

Should I boil tap water for brushing my teeth?

Yes. Any tap water that might be swallowed should be boiled before use.

Is it necessary to boil water to be used for washing hands and bathing?

There is no need to boil water for handwashing, bathing or showering.

Adults, teens, and older children, can shower or bathe, though they should avoid getting water in the mouth or swallowing the water. Infants and toddlers should be sponge bathed. No special soaps are necessary.

Care should be taken to prevent water from getting into deep open or post-surgical wounds. Consult your physician or health care provider for wound care instructions.

Do I need to use boiled water for washing clothes or flushing the toilet?

No.

Can I use bottled water instead of boiling tap water?

Yes. Bottled water can be used for all of the situations where boiled tap water is recommended above. Be sure that the bottled water is from a reliable source.

Should I boil the tap water I give to my animals or pets?

You can boil the tap water you give to the animals in your care. Your veterinarian can tell you if this precaution is necessary.

How will I know when it is safe to drink my tap water?

You will be notified when tests show that the tap water is safe to drink. You may be asked to run water to flush the pipes in your home before using your tap water or be given.

