

Hurricanes and Public Health Concerns

Answers to Commonly Asked Questions about Water Supply

Is my tap water safe to drink?

Flooding due to a hurricane may compromise or contaminate some water supplies, including the water coming from several large public water companies. During hurricanes or flooding, state and local officials are monitoring water quality very carefully to ensure that any potential contaminants are identified quickly and everyone is informed appropriately.

If it is determined that a water supply is or is likely to be contaminated, official advisories will be issued stating that consumers should boil or treat their water, use bottled water or other alternatives until water quality returns to a safe level.

What is the proper way to disinfect my water so that it is safe to drink?

The preferred method of treatment is boiling. Boiling water kills harmful bacteria and parasites. Bring water to a full ROLLING boil for at least 1 minute to kill most infectious organisms. If boiling water is not possible (power outages) potentially contaminated water may be treated with chlorine or iodine tablets. However, this treatment will not kill parasitic organisms.

To disinfect with chlorine mix six drops (1/8 teaspoon) of unscented, ordinary household chlorine bleach (5.25 percent sodium hypochlorite) per gallon of water. Mix the solution thoroughly, and let stand for about thirty minutes. To disinfect using iodine put eight drops of 2% tincture of iodine in one quart of water. Allow the water to stand at least 30 minutes before it is used.

What infectious organisms might be present in contaminated water?

Disease transmission from contaminated water occurs principally by ingesting water. The major organisms of concern are parasites, such as [Giardia](#) and [Cryptosporidium](#), and bacteria, such as [Shigella](#) and [E. coli](#). These organisms primarily affect the gastrointestinal system, causing diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea, and vomiting with or without fever. Most of these illnesses are not usually serious or life-threatening, except in the elderly or those with compromised immune systems.

What if I have already consumed potentially contaminated water?

Even if someone has consumed potentially contaminated water from either a public water system or a private well before they were aware of the boil water advisory, the likelihood of becoming ill is usually low. Anyone experiencing symptoms of gastroenteritis, such as

diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, with or without fever, should seek medical attention.

In what other activities should I avoid using potentially contaminated water?

Contaminated water should NOT be used for drinking, making prepared drinks, ice-making, brushing teeth, washing food or preparing food, or drinking water for pets. Water may be added to foods that will undergo a rolling boil for at least 1 minute.

Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing dishes or clothes?

Yes, if you rinse hand-washed dishes for a minute in dilute bleach (1 tablespoon per gallon of water), or clean your dishes in a dishwasher using the hot wash and dry cycles. It is also safe to wash clothes in tap water.

Is potentially contaminated water safe for bathing and shaving?

The water may be used for showering, baths, shaving and washing, so long as care is taken not to swallow water. Children and disabled individuals should have their bathing supervised to ensure water is not ingested. Though the risk of illness is minimal, individuals who have recent surgical wounds or are gave compromised immune systems because of HIV/AIDS, cancer treatment or transplant treatment should consider using bottled or boiled water for cleansing until the advisory is lifted. [Note: it said chronic disease, too, but that's a huge category and mostly not really at risk.]

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

Based on the current conditions of the affected public water supplies, vigorous hand washing with soap and your tap water is safe for basic personal hygiene. The use of boiled, treated, or bottled water for hand washing is usually only necessary when the water supply is seriously contaminated - which was not the case during Hurricane Floyd.

Can I visit my dentist during a boil water advisory?

If your dentist's office is under the boil water advisory, they will need to use boiled or disinfected water for all procedures. If they cannot do this, they will reschedule your appointment to after the advisory has been lifted.

What if I get my water from a well?

Well water, like water from public water companies, may have become contaminated as a result of flooding. Residents should check with their local health officers to determine if their wells may have been affected and what disinfection procedures to use. Excellent information is also available from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on the web at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes/>

Do I need any vaccinations if I have been exposed to flood water?

There is not usually a need to give vaccines during flood-related events. In some cases (see below) a tetanus booster may be indicated.

Tetanus: Individuals exposed to flood waters with an open wound (not minor cuts and abrasions) who have not had a tetanus booster shot in 10 years should receive a tetanus booster. Mass vaccination of the general public and emergency responders is not recommended.

Hepatitis A, typhoid and cholera: Since these diseases are unlikely to be transmitted under these circumstances, vaccination against them is not indicated.

Is it safe for me to participate in the cleanup (basements, offices, etc.)?

It is recommended that individuals participating in the cleanup of contaminated water sites protect themselves with protective clothing, including boots and gloves that are water proof, and guard against injury by sharp objects and electrical shock.

How can I get additional, up-to-date information?

Consult your Local Health Department for information, or the following web sites:

<http://www.state.nj.us/health>

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes>

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/flood.html>