

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



Fact Sheet on Drinking Water

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, around 150 drinking water facilities in Louisiana are either operating on a boil water notice or are not operating at all. Professionals from local water systems, the state and EPA are working to assess water systems to determine what needs to be done to make the water safe for consumers.

Exposure to certain microorganisms in water can make people sick, and may cause diarrhea which increases the risk of dehydration. Exposure can come from drinking contaminated water, cooking with it, making prepared drinks or brushing your teeth.

To find out the status of your water system, check your utility bill to find out the name of the water system that provides your water. A list of all parish water systems under a boil advisory is available at <http://www.dhh.louisiana.gov/offices/?ID=145>. If your water system is listed on the chart of systems on a boil order, then it is unhealthy to drink or use tap water without boiling at this time. This list is being regularly updated as environmental health workers carry out sampling of water systems. In addition to the health department's information, water systems will notify customers through local media outlets (radio, television and newspaper) when a boil order has been issued for that system or when it has been lifted.

Vigorous boiling for one minute will kill disease-causing microorganisms present in water. The flat taste of boiled water can be improved by pouring it back and forth from one container to another (called aeration), by allowing it to stand for a few hours, or by adding a small pinch of salt for each quart of water boiled.

Dehydration (thirst) can be life threatening as well. Make sure that children and older adults in particular have enough good drinking water and that they drink it. Older adults can be at risk for dehydration because of a decreased thirst sensation and do not feel the urge to drink as often as younger people. Older adults may also take medications that increase the risk of dehydration and have physical conditions that make it difficult to drink.

Well water: If you use a private well as your drinking water source, it is important that an expert test the quality if it has been affected by floodwaters. Drilled, driven or bored wells are best disinfected by a well or pump contractor, because it is difficult for the private owner to thoroughly disinfect these wells. If you suspect that your well may be contaminated, contact your local or state health department or agriculture extension agent for specific advice on disinfecting your well.

When you are concerned or unsure about the quality of your water, you should treat it or find an alternative source of water until the problem is fixed.

For more information on drinking water safety, please call 1 (800)426-4791 or visit:
<http://www.epa.gov/safewater>