

CONTAMINATED SITES **Frequently Asked Health Questions**

Risk of Illness

Q: Will this contamination make me sick?

A: Because the risk of illness may increase with higher chemical levels consumed over longer periods of time, you should drink water that meets safe standards. This can be done by simply installing an appropriate filter or connecting to the municipal water supply. Drinking water with chemical levels below standard is not likely to cause illness. Even drinking water for brief periods with chemical levels slightly above standard does not significantly increase the risk of illness.

Q: Will this contamination make my children sick?

A: Drinking water standards are set to protect children as well as adults.

Q: Could this contamination have caused my illness?

A: Since the causes for many diseases are not completely understood, it is difficult to determine whether something in your drinking water or soil caused your illness. You can find more information about your illness at:

www.healthfinder.gov

www.webmd.com

www.mayoclinic.com

Q: Did this contamination cause my cancer? Will I get cancer because of this contamination?

A: Since the causes of most cancers are not completely understood, and the chances of developing cancer over a lifetime are one in three for all people in the U.S., it is very difficult to determine whether something in your drinking water or soil caused your cancer.

Q: At what levels will chemicals cause illness?

A: Because drinking water standards are designed with large safety factors, illness is usually only likely from drinking water with very high levels for a long time. Even drinking water for brief periods with chemical levels slightly above standard does not significantly increase the risk of illness. Drinking water with chemical levels below standard is not likely to cause illness.

Q: How do these chemicals affect people?

A: Possible health effects vary with each chemical. See individual chemical fact sheets for details.

Q: What is the effect from multiple chemicals?

A: The science of toxicology is now studying health effects of exposure to more than one chemical at a time.

Avoiding Exposure

Q: Should I stop drinking the water?

A: It depends on the levels of chemicals in your water. Drinking water with chemical levels below standard is not likely to cause illness. Drinking water for brief periods with levels slightly above standard does not significantly increase the risk of illness. Risk of illness may increase with higher chemical levels consumed over longer periods; you should drink water that meets safe standards by installing an appropriate filter or connecting to the municipal water supply.

Q: Should I stop drinking the water if I am ill?

A: If you are ill, you should share your concerns about environmental exposures with your doctor. Drinking water with chemical levels below standard is not likely to cause illness, even for ill individuals. Even drinking water with chemical levels slightly above standard for a short period is unlikely to cause illness, but you should consult your doctor. Installing an appropriate filter or connecting to a municipal water supply would insure drinking water that meets acceptable standards.

Q: Can I use my water to mix formula for my baby?

A: If the levels of chemicals are levels less than the standard, it's OK to use your water to make formula. If the levels of chemicals are slightly above standards, you can use the water for a short time without significantly increasing the risk of illness for you or your baby.

If the level of nitrates in your water, however, is more than 10 mg/L, you should use canned formula or use bottled water to make infant formula. If you are unsure of the nitrates level in your water, use canned infant formula or use bottled water.

Q: Should I stop using my water for household use such as showering, cooking, laundry, dishwashing, outdoor pool, lawn/garden watering, kids sprinkler play, etc)?

A: If your water meets safe standards, it is acceptable for all household uses.

For most chemicals, water with concentrations over the drinking standard may still be acceptable for household uses other than drinking. Water containing volatile chemicals (benzene; 1,1-DCE; EDB; MTBE; toluene; TCE; vinyl chloride; xylenes, etc.) with concentrations above the drinking water standard should not be used for household purposes. Volatile chemicals move easily from water to air where they can be inhaled.

Q: Will boiling water get rid of the contamination?

A: Although boiling is effective for treating water contaminated with some bacteria and viruses, it does not remove most chemical contaminants. Water with concentrations of volatile chemicals well over (above) the drinking water standard should not be boiled. Volatile chemicals move easily from water to air where they can be inhaled.

Q: Should children play in contaminated soil?

A: Contact with soil containing low levels of contaminants is not likely to cause illness, even for a long time. You should, however, limit your child's exposure to soil with chemical concentrations above target levels. Children ages one to three tend to put their hands or objects in their mouths. You can limit their exposure by covering the area in question with clean soil, sod, or a layer of mulch (pine straw, leaves, bark). You can also restrict access to the area with a fence.

Well Testing

Q: Who will test my well water? When?

A: If a city, county, or other utility supplies your water (that is you do not have your own well), then your water has been tested. If you received a letter from the Department of Environmental Protection and your well has not been tested, or it has been more than three years, it will be tested. Call the Department of Health toll-free at 877-798-2772.

Q: My well was tested. Can I get it re-tested?

A: If it has been more than three years since your well was last tested, it can be retested.

Q: Who will pay for my well water test?

A: Tests by the county health department are free of charge. Private laboratories charge a fee depending on the test.

Q: What private labs can test my well water? How much does it cost?

A: Check the yellow pages for nearby labs or visit <http://www.floridadep.org/labs/cgi-bin/aams/index.asp>. Fees vary, depending on the test. A standard analysis for volatile organic chemicals is \$30 to \$50 per sample. Depending on the number of metals, an analysis for metals is \$50 to \$200 per sample.

Q: If a private lab tests my water and finds a level above a standard, can the state help?

A: Yes. If a recent sample shows a level above safe standards, contact your county health department for a confirmation test. If the violation is confirmed, the state's Department of Environmental Protection can help. The Department of Environmental Protection cannot help, however, in cases where the levels of chemicals occur naturally.

Q: For what chemicals should the laboratory test my well water?

A: The laboratory should test for those chemicals listed in your letter from the Department of Environmental Protection. Typically, well water is tested for bacterial contamination, volatile organic chemicals (VOCs), and/or metals. You should also have your well tested for nitrates if you make infant formula.

Q: Will you test my irrigation well water?

A: Shallow irrigation wells should not be used for drinking, bathing, cooking, or other household uses. Bacteria from surface water can get into shallow irrigation wells. County health departments do not test irrigation wells. You should contact a private laboratory for irrigation well testing.

Other Health Questions

Q: What do the chemical levels of my well water mean?

A: Risk of illness from drinking water depends on the contaminant, how much there is, the length of exposure, and how the water is used. If you use municipal water only, there is virtually no risk from contaminated groundwater. If you use your well for drinking, the risk depends on the chemicals present and their levels. If you only use your well for lawn or garden irrigation, the risk is much less. Drinking water with chemical levels below standard is not likely to cause illness. Even drinking water for brief periods with chemical levels slightly above standard does not significantly increase the risk of illness.

Q: What is causing the smell/color in my toilet/shower/sink?

A: Hydrogen sulfide, which occurs naturally in some well water, typically causes a rotten egg smell. Gasoline can cause a strong smell. Iron, which occurs naturally in some well water, can cause taste problems and stain toilets, tubs, and sinks.

Q: Can I get more information on the chemical(s) found in my well?

A: Fact sheets for the 19 chemicals most commonly found in private drinking water wells are on the Department of Health internet page.

Q: What is the county health department's role?

A: The county health department coordinates private drinking water well testing.

Q: Is DOH going to do a public health assessment, medical testing, health study, or cancer cluster investigation?

A: DOH assessments, testing, and investigations depend on the extent of the contamination. We will review all environmental data to determine appropriate follow-up.

Q: Can I petition the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to investigate this situation?

A: ATSDR and Florida DOH work together to determine what measures are appropriate. You can, however, contact ATSDR directly at 1-888-422-8737 or at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/.

Q: What information should I take to my doctor?

A: You can give your doctor the DOH chemical-specific drinking water fact sheet, as well as the appropriate ATSDR Case Study in Environmental Medicine:

(<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HEC/CSEM/subs.html>)

- Arsenic
- Asbestos
- Benzene
- Chromium
- Lead
- Nitrate
- Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs)
- Radioactive iodine 131
- Radon

Q: Who pays for my health care/medical bills?

A: Your insurance company should cover your health care expenses. Some county health departments can provide limited medical services for qualified individuals.

Q: What can I do to protect my health?

A: Seek drinking water that meets safe standards by simply installing an appropriate filter or connecting to the municipal water supply. Drinking water with chemical levels below standard is not likely to cause illness. Even drinking water for brief periods with chemical levels slightly above standard does not significantly increase the risk of illness. Also, maintain good general health by eating healthy foods, getting plenty of sleep, exercising, and practicing other good health habits (see “Keeping Healthy” brochure).

Q: Is it safe for my animal or pet to drink the water?

A: You should consult your veterinarian for advice on the health of your animal or pet.

Q: What is the Department of Health website?

A: The main DOH website is <http://www.doh.state.fl.us/>. The DOH website for contaminated sites is <http://www.myfloridaeh.com/>

General Questions

Q: Will I be relocated?

A: In most cases, relocation is not necessary. The US Environmental Protection Agency relocates people only in rare circumstances.

Q: Who is going to compensate me for lost property value?

A: Supply and demand for properties in an area determine property values, which vary over time. Discovery of contamination may reduce property values, but, in many cases, when the extent of contamination is determined, property values rebound. An attorney can advise you of your legal rights.

Q: Whom can I sue? Will the state help me sue for this contamination?

A: You should seek the advice of a qualified attorney for questions about litigation and your legal rights. Most Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Health records are available for public review.

Q: Is the contamination killing my lawn, flowers, vegetables, fruits, trees?

A: Chemical levels typically found in soil on, or water under, contaminated properties are usually too low to affect plants. Contaminants called herbicides can, however, affect plant growth. For more information, contact your county agricultural extension agent.

Q: If I received a letter from the Department of Environmental Protection, am I legally obligated to notify tenants, renters, and other users of my property?

A: We recommend you share this information with people who use your property. You should consult a qualified attorney for legal advice on your obligations.

Q: I am a tenant or renter. Is my water safe to drink?

A: If your property owner received a notification letter from the Department of Environmental Protection, we recommend they share the information with you.

Environmental/Cleanup Questions

- Q: Where is this contamination coming from?
- Q: How did the contamination get into my water?
- Q: Who is going to clean up the contamination?
- Q: How long has someone known about this site? Why didn't someone tell me before?
- Q: How long is it going to take to clean up the contamination?
- Q: Who is going to pay for cleaning up the contamination?
- Q: Will the state pay for filters or municipal hook-up?
- Q: Can I get bottled water?
- Q: Can I get help if contaminant levels are below drinking water standards?
- Q: Why won't the state provide an alternative water source when the contaminant concentration is just above the drinking water standard (but equals it when rounded)?
- Q: Why are drill rigs in my neighborhood? What are they doing?
- Q: Can the contamination get into my creek/lake/pond?

A: The Department of Environmental Protection can best answer the above environmental/cleanup questions.

Q: What is the Department of Environmental Protection web site?

A: www.dep.state.fl.us/waste/

Q: What is the Department of Environmental Protection toll-free number?

A: 866-282-0787