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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 of 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 the water to a rolling boil for a minimum of 5 minutes. When it cools, refrigerate the water in clean containers. (A pinch of salt per quart may improve the rather "flat" taste of boiled water.) If you do not want to boil your water, you can disinfect it by adding 1/8 teaspoon of bleach (common household bleach containing 5.25% sodium hypochlorite) per gallon of water. Allow the treated water to stand for 30 minutes before you use it. Do not use bleach containing perfume, dyes, or other additives.

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 periodically analyzed to ensure they meet health standards.

During a Boil Order, can I use my 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
Washing fruit/ vegetables	No
Preparing food	No
Coffee, tea, lemonade, etc.	No. See below for information on soda dispensers and coffee makers.
Laundry	Yes. Since there is minimal risk in laundry other options may be considered such as using bleach in the rinse cycle or avoiding laundry until boil order has been lifted.
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?

The risk of bathing or showering in tap water is uncertain and so should be avoided, particularly by people with open wounds or who are immune-compromised. For those people who choose to shower or bathe in the tap water, minimize the time spent in the water and be sure to keep your eyes and mouth closed. Babies and young children should not bathe or shower in tap water because they often swallow some water accidentally.

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.

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 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.

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. The EPA approved laboratory will notify the water system when the Boil Order can be lifted, and the water system, in turn, will notify you.

What do I need to do after the boil order is lifted?

Once the boil order is lifted the following steps should be taken.

- Flush building water lines by allowing both the hot and cold water to run for several minutes at each fixture.
- Clean faucets and aerators

- Dispose of ice cubes made with tap water that had not been boiled during the boil order and make fresh ice cubes.
- Replace or clean filters on faucet filtration systems or whole house filters per manufacturer's recommendations.
- Unfortunately, people will try to take advantage of situations such as this. To avoid scams direct additional questions to a licensed plumber.

A note about E. coli bacteria: E. coli is a sub-group of the fecal coliform bacteria group. There are many strains of E. coli, most of which are harmless, but some strains 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

For additional information

- For personal medical questions, contact your health care provider.
- For specific information about your particular water system, contact the water system representative.
- For additional general health information, contact the Illinois Department of Public Health <http://www.idph.state.il.us>
- For information on IEPA regulatory oversight of water systems, <https://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/drinking-water/Pages/default.aspx>
- General questions about drinking water quality, call the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791 (M-F, 10am-4pm).

Websites with additional information on E. coli bacteria information:

- Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.gov>
- Centers for Disease Control and Protection: <http://www.cdc.gov>

(Adopted from the McHenry County Health Department- Frequently Asked Questions about Boil Orders)