



What's Coming Out of the Tap? How to Ensure That Your Family's Drinking Water Is Safe

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Dry cleaners, gas stations, septic tanks, toxic waste sites, and farms may all release chemicals or infectious agents that can contaminate household drinking water. Fortunately, with a little research, proper testing, and treatment (if necessary) you can help to ensure that the water you and your family drink is safe. NRDC is joining with local communities to keep drinking water clean and to curb pollution long before it reaches your tap.

How Can I Make Sure My Family's Drinking Water Is Safe?

Although most drinking water in the United States is safe, you should be aware of possible water contamination problems where you live. Pollution can seep into groundwater and streams and eventually find its way into drinking water. So-called "wildcat sewers" (systems that collect wastewater containing dangerous bacteria and parasites and discharge it without treatment) can also put drinking water sources at risk.

Some simple steps can help keep your family's drinking water safe:

- **Don't pour toxics down the drain.** Harmful chemicals and strong detergents or oils can make their way from your drain into drinking water sources.
- **Check your community's annual Water Quality Report.** Local water utilities are required to mail this report (also known as a consumer

confidence or right-to-know report) to their customers every year. You can also request a copy any time or look for the report on your water utility's web site.

- **Get your drinking water tested.** If you are worried about contaminants in your drinking water, consider having your water tested by a laboratory. If you have a private well, you are responsible for testing the water; annual testing is recommended. Small amounts of some contaminants may be found in your water, and do not necessarily pose a health risk. The chart on page two shows some common contaminants and their effect on your health.

- **Use a water filter that meets NSF/ANSI standards and is certified to remove contaminant(s) from your water.** Check the label to determine if a water filter is certified to remove any contaminants of concern that were detected in your water.

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Community Resources for Drinking Water Safety

■ Contact your state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) if you suspect that a local facility is illegally polluting local waters.

■ Volunteer to monitor bodies of water in your area. Volunteer monitoring programs exist across the country and provide valuable data to government, policy makers, researchers, and students.

These are some pollutants to watch out for:

Contaminant	What it causes	Where it comes from	Drinking water quality standard concentration (mg/liter) ¹
Arsenic	Cancer of the bladder, kidneys, liver, lungs, prostate, and skin.	Mine drainage, coal refuse piles, coal ash dumps, power plants, metal smelters, and naturally occurring	0.01
Atrazine	Cardiovascular, reproductive and kidney problems, damage to adrenal glands; some studies suggest increased risk of cancer.	Farms (mostly corn and soybean) where this pesticide is applied.	0.003
Chromium	Hexavalent chromium can cause stomach ulcers, convulsions, and kidney and liver damage, and increase the risk of cancer.	Metal plating, dyeing, leather tanning and wood preserving industries, power plants, coal ash dumps.	0.1
Bacteria: <i>E. coli</i>, Total coliforms	Total coliforms are not necessarily a health threat, but may indicate the presence of harmful bacteria. <i>E. coli</i> causes potentially deadly gastrointestinal disease.	Coliforms are naturally occurring. <i>E. coli</i> is found in animal and human feces, and raw sewage.	0 (5% positive samples) ²
Haloacetic acids	Increased risk of cancer.	By-products of water chlorination	0.060
 Lead	Nervous system, brain and kidney damage; miscarriage. Learning and behavioral problems in children.	Lead plumbing and fixtures in homes, mine drainage, coal ash dumps, metal products industries.	0.015
MtBE	Damage to the liver, kidneys and nervous system.	Gasoline spills, leaking underground fuel storage tanks.	None
 Nitrates	"Blue baby syndrome", a potentially deadly syndrome in infants.	Fertilizer runoff, septic tank and sewage leaks, natural deposits.	10
Parasites: <i>Cryptosporidium</i>, <i>Giardia lamblia</i>	Gastrointestinal disease, which can be life-threatening in people with weak immune systems.	Animal and human feces, raw sewage.	0 (99% removal) ³
 Perchlorate	Hypothyroidism, reproductive problems; developmental problems in fetuses and children.	Military and aerospace facilities (explosives and rocket fuel); fireworks.	None
Perchloroethylene (Tetrachloroethylene)	Increased risk of cancer, liver problems.	Dry cleaners, industrial facilities.	0.005
 Trihalomethanes	Increased risk of miscarriage, birth defects and cancer.	By-products of water chlorination.	0.08
Trichloroethylene	Increased risk of cancer, liver problems.	Metal degreasing sites, industrial facilities	0.005

 **Especially harmful to children and/or pregnant women or nursing moms.**

Source: Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated

² EPA has set a Maximum contaminant Level Goal (MCLG) of zero (0), and an enforceable requirement that public water systems have no more than 5% of samples testing positive for these bacteria per month.

³ EPA has set a Maximum Contaminant Level Goal (MCLG) of zero (0), and an enforceable requirement that public water systems treat water to achieve 99% removal or inactivation of *Giardia* and *Cryptosporidium*.