

The following information is taken from the Washington State Department of Health, Office of Drinking Water. To view the entire publication, see [Safe Drinking Water](#).

Emergency Drinking Water

In spite of our best efforts, drinking water emergencies can and do occur. Water sources can become contaminated. Treatment equipment may break down. Water pipes may leak or break, or backflow may occur through an unknown cross-connection. During an emergency, if the safety of a drinking water supply is questionable, take appropriate action to protect health.

In most drinking water emergencies, the main concern is that harmful microorganisms may have contaminated the water. In such cases, the public water system issues a boiled water notice. The notice instructs customers to boil their drinking water until the problem is corrected.

Homeowners served by individual supplies can also take action in emergencies to protect health. Obtaining water from a safe source on a temporary basis is one option. Boiling the water for three to five minutes is another option. Using unscented liquid chlorine household bleach can also be an effective emergency treatment method.

Disinfection with bleach may be more practical than boiling when larger volumes of water need to be treated. Follow the instructions provided below.

Treating Water With a 5–6% Liquid Chlorine Bleach Solution <i>(Allow treated CLEAR water to stand 30 minutes before using; treated CLOUDY water to stand for 60 minutes)</i>		
Volume of Water To Be Treated	Treating Clear Water	Treating Cloudy, Very Cold or Surface Water
	Bleach Solution To Add	Bleach Solution To Add
1 quart/1 liter	3 drops	5 drops
1/2 gallon/2 quarts/2 liters	5 drops	10 drops OR 1/8 tsp
1 gallon	10 drops OR 1/8 tsp	20 drops OR 1/4 tsp
5 gallons	50 drops OR 2.5 mL OR 1/2 tsp	5 mL OR 1 tsp
10 gallons	5 mL OR 1 tsp	10 mL OR 2 tsp

tsp = teaspoon; Tbsp = tablespoon; mL = milliliter



1. From the above table, determine amount of bleach to add. If the water is off-color or cloudy, use double the amount of bleach shown in the table.

2. Add the bleach to the water and mix.
3. Let the mixture stand for 30 minutes prior to use. Waiting 30 minutes is very important, because the chlorine needs this time to kill any harmful organisms.

Treat water for making drinks, preparing food, or brushing teeth the same as water for drinking. Once disinfected, store water only in clean containers.

Boiling and disinfection generally affect only the microorganisms in the water. If you suspect your drinking water is contaminated with harmful chemicals, contact your local health agency or DOH for advice.