

How to Read Your Water Quality Report

From coast to coast, the news has been awash with reports of consumers kicking the bottled water habit and taking back the tap. People are catching on to the industry's marketing con job. They now know that bottled water is an overpriced rip-off that's no more pure or healthful than tap water. Furthermore, its production and transportation gobbles energy and spews pollution and climate-changing gases into our atmosphere.

If you're among the growing mass of people making the move to tap water, perhaps you have questions about the quality of your city or town's water supply. Although most municipal water beats the stuff in the bottle, learning more about it makes sense.

We all have the right to know what's in our drinking water. Congress codified this principle in 1996 with amendments to the Safe Drinking Water Act. The changes greatly improve public access to information about drinking water quality.

The Safe Drinking Water Act, passed in 1976, authorized EPA to set drinking water standards for all public water systems. Water utilities monitor and treat drinking water to abide by these federal standards. The 1996 amendments added a requirement for utilities to notify the public about any detected regulated contaminant and any water quality violation.

The centerpiece of these right-to-know provisions is the annual water quality report. Although these reports are intended to help consumers make informed choices about their drinking water, they can be confusing and full of jargon. This guide is intended to help you understand what your water quality report is and how to interpret what it tells you.





- EPA regulations and health goals for drinking water contaminants;
- A list of all detected regulated contaminants and their levels;
- Potential health effects of any contaminant detected at a level that violates EPA's health standard;
- An educational statement for people with weakened immune systems about *cryptosporidium* and other microbial contaminants;¹
- Contact information for the water system and EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline

What Is a Water Quality Report?

A water quality report, also called a consumer confidence report, lets you know what contaminants, if any, are in your drinking water and how these contaminants may affect your health. It lists all the regulated toxicants that were detected in your water over the preceding calendar year.

Who Gets a Water Quality Report?

A water quality report is available for every customer of a community water system, which is one that provides year-round service to more than 15 households or more than 25 people.

When Is a Water Quality Report Issued?

You should receive your water quality report by July 1 of each year.

What Does a Water Quality Report Tell You?

Every water quality report must contain certain information:

- The source of the drinking water, be it a river, lake, groundwater aquifer or some other body of water;
- A brief summary of the state's source water assessment of the susceptibility of the source water to contamination and how to get a copy of the complete assessment;

Why Is a Water Quality Report Important?

Your water system must tell you about any violation of EPA water quality standards at the time it occurs and again in the annual report. You should not drink water that fails to meet EPA standards because it may be unsafe. Thankfully, public utilities have worked hard to improve water quality, and today, more than 90 percent of water systems meet all EPA regulations.

Another important part of the report is the list of all detected regulated contaminants. EPA sets the maximum level of contaminants — the MCL — that it will allow in drinking water based on the filtering and treatment capabilities of today's technology. The water quality report also tells you about potentially harmful substances found in your water at levels below their legal limit, which often is or approaches the agency's more stringent, optimum human health goal for the maximum level of contaminants, the MCLG.



Decoding the Water Quality Report of Our Nation's Capital

Maximum Contaminant Level Goal: Below this level, a contaminant has no known or expected risk to human health.

Maximum Contaminant Level: The highest amount of a contaminant EPA allows in drinking water.

The amount of a contaminant detected in D.C. drinking water.

Not detected

How does a contaminant end up in D.C. drinking water?

| Water Entering WASA's Distribution System | | | | | | |
|---|-------|------------|-----|-------------------|--------------|---|
| | Units | EPA Limits | | DC Drinking Water | | Description / Typical Sources of Contaminants |
| | | MCLG | MCL | Highest | Range | |
| Inorganic Metal | | | | | | |
| Arsenic | ppb | 0 | 10 | 0.5 | ND to 0.5 | Erosion of natural deposits; Runoff from orchards |
| Barium | ppm | 2 | 2 | 0.05 | 0.03 to 0.05 | Erosion of natural deposits |
| Chromium | ppb | 100 | 100 | 3 | ND to 3 | Erosion of natural deposits |
| Selenium | ppb | 50 | 50 | 0.8 | ND to 0.8 | Erosion of natural deposits; discharge from mines |

D.C. drinking water has some arsenic in it.

Ideally, drinking water should have no arsenic present to minimize health risks, but this is not the requirement.

EPA requires that the concentration of arsenic be 10 ppb or less.

The highest amount of arsenic detected in D.C. water is 0.5 ppb, which meets EPA requirements, although it is slightly more than the ideal level.

Arsenic enters D.C. drinking water from the erosion of natural deposits and from runoff from orchards.

Maximum Contaminant Level Goal: Below this level, a contaminant has no known or expected risk to human health.

Maximum Contaminant Level: The highest amount of a contaminant EPA allows in drinking water.

Treatment Technique: A required process intended to reduce the level of a contaminant in drinking water.

The amount of a contaminant detected in D.C. drinking water.

How does a contaminant end up in D.C. drinking water?

| WASA's Distribution System | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------|--------------|-------------------|-----------|---|
| | Units | EPA Limits | | DC Drinking Water | | Description / Typical Sources of Contaminants |
| | | MCLG | MCL or TT | Highest | Range | |
| Microbial Indicators | | | | | | |
| Total Coliform Bacteria | % of total-coliform-positive samples | 0 | 5% (maximum) | 1.8% | 0 to 1.8% | Naturally present in the environment |
| Fecal Coliform | Number positive | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Human and animal fecal waste |
| E.coli bacteria | Number positive | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | Human and animal fecal waste |

D.C. drinking has some coliform bacteria in it.

Ideally, drinking water should have no coliform bacteria present to minimize health risks, but this is not the requirement.²

EPA requires coliform bacteria to be present in no more than 5 percent of the samples taken in a month. (large systems, like D.C.'s, must test 210 times a month.)

During one month, D.C. found coliforms in 1.8 percent of the samples it took. This is the highest portion of positive samples that D.C. drinking water had in a month, and it meets EPA regulations, although it is slightly more than the ideal level.

Coliform bacteria enter D.C. water from the natural environment.

How Is a Water Quality Report Distributed?

This depends on the size of the water system. All large water systems mail out the reports, often as an insert in the bill, and very large systems must both mail and post them online. Small systems serving fewer than 10,000 people can have the mailing requirement waived. In this case, however, they must publish the report in at least one local newspaper and make it available to the public upon request.

Water systems also must make a "good faith effort" to reach renters, workers and other consumers who do not receive water bills. These systems should use a combination of different outreach methods, such as posting the reports online, mailing them and advertising in local newspapers.

More information is available online at www.epa.gov/safewater/ccr/index.html. For general queries about water quality reports and other safe drinking water issues, you can contact EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline toll-free at 1-800-426-4791.

Endnotes

1 This section does not indicate if these microbes are in your drinking water. EPA requires that utilities remove 99 percent of cryptosporidium.

2 Most types of coliform bacteria are harmless, but they indicate possible fecal contamination, which can carry disease-causing viruses and organisms.

For more information:

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