



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BOIL WATER NOTICES

[Houston Water](#) will issue a boil water notice, even if there is a very unlikely possibility of drinking water contamination, as a precaution to protect customers. State laws require that a Boil Water Notice is issued if a water system has (or could have) become contaminated from a water main break or loss of system pressure.

### WHAT SHOULD I DO IF A BOIL WATER NOTICE IS ISSUED?

Do not drink the water without boiling it first. Bring all water to a rolling boil for at least two minutes, and let it cool before using, or use bottled water. Boiled or bottled water should be used for drinking, making ice, brushing teeth, food preparation, and water for pets. Boiling kills harmful bacteria and other organisms in the water that may cause diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea, and vomiting. Sometimes, these illnesses are contracted by ingesting contaminated water, and in some circumstances skin contact could also lead to infection. Most of these illnesses are not usually serious or life threatening except in the elderly, the very young or those who are immune compromised.

### HOW DO I BOIL MY WATER SO IT'S SAFE TO DRINK?

Bring water to a full rolling boil for two minutes, then allow the water to cool before use. Because water may take 30 minutes to cool, plan ahead. Make up a batch of boiled water in advance so you will not be tempted to use it hot and risk scalds or burns. Boiled water may be used for drinking, cooking, and washing.

### WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I DO NOT HAVE POWER (OR RUNNING WATER)?

Individuals without power (and / or running water) are advised to use bottled water for consumption.

### IS POTENTIALLY CONTAMINATED WATER SAFE FOR WASHING DISHES AND LAUNDRY?

If you have water, please use it only for health & safety reasons. If you must wash dishes or do laundry, please follow the guidelines below:

- **Hand-washing dishes:** Use boiled (then cooled) water, water from an alternate source, or after washing with dish detergent rinse for a minute in a dilute bleach (1 tablespoon of unscented bleach per gallon of water). Allow dishes, cutlery, cups, etc. to completely air dry before use.
- **Home dishwasher:** If the hot wash is at least 170°F and includes a full dry cycle, you do not need to boil water. However, most home dishwashers do not reach this temperature. If you are uncertain of the temperature of your dishwasher, rinse in dilute bleach and completely air dry as described for hand washed dishes.
- **Laundry:** You do not need to boil water, if the clothes are completely dried before being worn. However, increased turbidity that sometimes occurs during a boil water event may discolor clothing, especially whites.



HOUSTON HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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## **IS POTENTIALLY CONTAMINATED WATER SAFE FOR BATHING AND SHAVING?**

The water may be used by healthy people for showering, bathing, shaving, and washing if care is taken not to swallow water and avoid shaving nicks. To minimize the chance of infections, people with open wounds, cuts, blisters or recent surgical wounds and people who are immunocompromised or suffer from chronic illness should use boiled water (then cooled) or water from an alternate source. Children and disabled individuals should be supervised to ensure water is not ingested. Sponge bathing is advisable, and bathing time should be minimized to further reduce the potential for ingestion.

## **HOW SHOULD I WASH MY HANDS DURING A BOIL WATER NOTICE?**

Generally, vigorous hand washing with soap and your tap water is safe for basic personal hygiene. If you are washing your hands to prepare food, you should use boiled (then cooled) water, bottled water, or water from another acceptable source for hand washing.

## **CAN I BRUSH MY TEETH WITH THE WATER WITHOUT BOILING IT?**

No. Any water you ingest or place in your mouth should be disinfected by boiling (and then cooled) or come from an alternate source. Bottled water is great for brushing your teeth.

## **CAN I USE MY WATER FOR COOKING?**

No. Any water used for food preparation or cooking needs to be from an acceptable alternate source or boiled for at least two minutes.

## **WHAT IF I AM BOILING MY WATER AS PART OF THE COOKING PROCESS?**

It is more protective to boil the water first, to prevent the potential for inadequate heating. The cooking process should bring the water to a full rolling boil for at least one minute before adding the food item (for example, making pasta). If the water will be at a slight boil for a long time, then this will also be protective. For example, you may be cooking beans or boiling chicken for 10 - 20 minutes.

## **HOW SHOULD I WASH FRUIT AND VEGETABLES AND MAKE ICE?**

Fruits, vegetables, and any other foods that will not be cooked should be washed and rinsed with boiled (and then cooled) water or water from an acceptable alternate source. Similarly, ice should be made with either boiled water or water from an acceptable alternate source. Ice made from automatic icemakers during the time the notice was issued should be discarded.

## **CAN I USE MY WATER FOR MAKING BABY FORMULA OR DRINKS?**

No, not without precautions. Any water used for baby food, formula, or making beverages must be boiled (and then cooled) or be from an acceptable alternate source.

## **IS THE WATER SAFE TO GIVE TO MY PET?**

To be certain, give pets water that has been boiled then cooled or water from an acceptable alternate source.

## **DOES A BOIL WATER NOTICE AFFECT HOW I CAN USE MY TOILETS?**

There is no need to disinfect water used for flushing.



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## **DOES MY IN-HOME WATER TREATMENT SYSTEM PROVIDE ENOUGH PROTECTION?**

No. Most in-home treatment devices are not designed to remove pathogens and should not be relied on to protect you during a boil water event. Even treatment units that are designed to remove pathogens may not do so all the time unless they have been properly maintained. Common home treatment devices that have limited or no ability to remove pathogens include: carbon filters; water softeners and other ion exchange units; sediment filters; chlorine removers; and aerators.

## **WHAT IF I HAVE A REVERSE OSMOSIS TREATMENT UNIT ON MY FAUCET OR HOUSE?**

A properly operating reverse osmosis (RO) unit can remove pathogens, including viruses, bacteria and protozoa. However, there are many units available to the public through hardware stores and elsewhere, not all of which can be relied upon to remove pathogens. Furthermore, RO units must be diligently maintained to assure effective treatment. If you are at all uncertain of the capabilities of your reverse osmosis unit, do not rely on it to remove potentially harmful pathogens. Instead, you should use boiled (and then cooled) water or water from an acceptable alternate source.

## **WHAT IF I HAVE A WATER PITCHER/DISPENSER WITH FILTER?**

Most of these units are not capable of removing pathogens, including viruses, bacteria, and protozoa. The few that are designed to do so, may still require disinfection to address viruses and must be properly operated and diligently maintained to ensure effective treatment. It is recommended that you use boiled (and then cooled) water or an alternate source such as bottled water.

## **ARE THERE ANY OTHER WAYS TO DISINFECT MY WATER SO THAT IT'S SAFE TO DRINK?**

Boiling and bottled water are the most reliable means to ensure safe potable water during a boil water event and should always be your first choices.

## **WHAT IF I HAVE ALREADY CONSUMED POTENTIALLY CONTAMINATED WATER?**

The likelihood of becoming ill is low. However, illness is certainly possible, especially for people that have a chronic illness or may be immunocompromised. This is why boil water notices are issued.

Anyone experiencing symptoms of gastroenteritis, such as diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, with or without fever, should seek medical attention. These symptoms are not unique to exposure to potential contaminants/organisms in the water, and a doctor's involvement is key to identifying the cause of your illness.

## **WHAT SHOULD HOMEOWNERS DO WHEN THE BOIL WATER NOTICE IS LIFTED?**

Houston Water will notify you when it is no longer necessary to boil the water. You should flush your water system by running all cold water faucets in your home for at least one minute, cleaning automatic ice makers by making and discarding three batches of ice, and running water softeners through a regeneration cycle.

## **WHO SHOULD I CONTACT WITH ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?**

Please call 311 or 713-837-0311.



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