DEQ
Montana Department
of Environmental Quality

Frequently Asked Questions about Boil Orders

The Montana Department of Environmental Quality has prepared this information to assist people in communities that may be under a Boil Water Order.

Why must I boil my water? A Boil Order has been issued to your water system because either recent testing has shown the presence of organisms that could cause illness (such as fecal or E. coli bacteria), or technical/physical problems in the water system have significantly increased the possibility of bacterial contamination.

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 waterborne 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 can I make my water safe? Boiling the water is the best way to ensure that it is free of illness causing organisms. Bring water to a rolling boil for a minimum of 3 to 5 minutes. When it cools, refrigerate the water in clean containers. If you don't want to boil your water, you can disinfect it by adding 1/8 teaspoon of bleach (common household bleach containing 5.25 percent sodium hypochlorite) per gallon of water. Do not use bleach containing perfume, dyes, or other additives. Household bleach is not an approved disinfectant for drinking water.

Can I use bottled water? Buying and using bottled water is a good alternative to boiling water.

During a Boil Order, do not use your tap water for…

- Drinking
- Ice cubes (and existing ice cubes should be thrown out)
- Brushing teeth
- Baby's formula
- Washing fruit/vegetables
- Preparing food
- Preparing beverages such as coffee, tea, lemonade, etc.
- Watering pets
- Washing hands – An alcohol based hand sanitizer may be used.
- Watering grass or garden

Can I use tap water for laundry? Yes, since there is minimal risk in laundry. However, other options may be considered such as using bleach in the rinse cycle or avoiding laundry until boil order has been lifted.

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 immunocompromised. 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:

1. Wash the dishes as you normally would.
2. 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.
3. 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.

How long will the Boil Order remain in effect? Each Boil Order situation is different making it impossible to predict how long any particular Boil Order will remain in effect. It will not be lifted until testing shows that the water meets public health standards.

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.

If you have any other questions please contact your local county sanitarian or the DEQ's Public Water Supply Program at 406-444-4400.