



Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care

| home | central site | contact us | site map | français |

Public Information

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Section

Public Information

Water Safety : Putting Your Well Water to the Test

Get in the habit of water testing

Water quality can change. Testing your well water three times every year will keep you up-to-date on the quality of your family's drinking water. Next to properly maintaining your well, testing is your best strategy for playing it safe.

This Fact Sheet explains which agency or professional provides what kind of testing service, and how to take a sample of your water.

Who does what?

Service	Contact if...	How to Locate
Public Health Unit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • you suspect that surface water, or human or animal waste, have entered your well • you require a water sample bottle for indicator bacteria testing • you require help in interpreting your water quality sample results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contact your local public health unit • call INFOline toll free at 1-866-532-3161 In Toronto, call 416-314-5518 TTY 1-800-387-5559
Public Health Lab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • you require a water sample bottle for indicator bacteria testing • public health labs perform bacteriological water testing only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • call INFOline toll free at 1-866-532-3161 In Toronto, call 416-314-5518 TTY 1-800-387-5559
Private Accredited Lab	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • you have concerns about chemicals in your well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • for information about accredited laboratories, contact MOE at 1-800-565-4923
Licensed Well Contractor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • you have concerns that your well is improperly constructed, or requires upgrading or maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • see the listings under the <i>Water Well Drilling & Services</i> heading in your local Yellow Pages • ensure they are licensed to provide this service

If your well water test shows unacceptable levels of bacteria, stop drinking the water immediately!

In Ontario, [public health labs](#) will test for bacteria and other organisms but not chemical substances. If you suspect that you might have problems with your water that are chemical in nature, such as with sulphur or solvents, send a water sample to a private, accredited lab. The Ontario [Ministry of the Environment](#) can help find an accredited private lab nearest you.

Testing water for bacteria – what to expect

Completing the form

You must complete the form. Water will not be tested if the form is not completely and accurately filled in.

Be prepared to supply the following information :

- your daytime telephone number
- the four-line detailed location, including postal code, of your water source
- your [public health unit](#) number (see page 2 of water sample submission form)
- an indication of how you wish to receive your results
- the date the sample was collected
- a complete mailing address for results.

Note : Do not submit samples from high-risk water supplies, such as lakes, rivers or streams, unless water has been properly treated first.

Sampling your water for accurate results



1. Get a proper water sample bottle from the [public health laboratory](#) or your local [public health unit](#), or one of the designated pickup stations in your area. Only water collected directly into these bottles will be accepted.

2. Plan to sample your well water when you're sure you can deliver it to the [public health unit](#) or other designated location within 24 hours. Your water sample should not be left sitting for a long period of time as this can lead to inaccurate results.



3. Remove any aerator, screen or other attachments from your faucet. Don't take a sample from an outside faucet or the garden hose. Take a sample from an inside tap with no aerator, such as the bathtub.

4. Disinfect the end of the faucet spout with an alcohol swab or dilute bleach solution (1 part household bleach to 10 parts water) before running water to remove debris or bacteria. Disinfecting the tap with a flame is not recommended because this can damage the faucet.



5. Turn on cold water and let it run for three to four minutes to remove standing water from your plumbing system.

6. Remove the sample bottle lid :

- don't touch the inside of the lid
- don't put the lid down
- don't rinse out the bottle.



7. Fill the bottle to the level that is marked, as described in the enclosed instructions, and close the lid firmly.

8. Keep the sample cool (but not frozen) until it's returned to the drop-off location. Again, deliver the sample within 24 hours or it may not be processed. Remember that proper handling will help to make sure that your test results are accurate! Don't store samples in warm places such as your car trunk.

Interpreting results

Bacteria – Total coliform include bacteria that are always present in animal wastes and sewage, but are also found in soil and vegetation. Their presence may indicate that surface water is entering your well.

Escherichia coli (or *E.Coli*) are bacteria found only in the digestive systems of people and animals. Their presence in your well water is usually the result of animal or human waste contamination from a nearby source.

See [Pathogens and Your Well Water](#) for more about bacteria and other pathogens.

Test Outcomes

Organisms	Ontario Drinking Water Standards Interpretation		Reason
Total coliform per 100 mL	5 or less	no significant evidence of bacterial contamination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 samples in a row, taken 1 to 3 weeks apart, with this designation are needed to determine the stability of the water supply
<i>E.Coli</i> per 100 mL	0		
Total coliform per 100 mL	more than 5	significant evidence of bacterial contamination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> may be unsafe to drink consult your local public health unit for information as soon as possible
<i>E.Coli</i> per 100 mL	0		
<i>E.Coli</i> per 100 mL	> 0	unsafe to drink – animal or human waste contamination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> unsafe to drink evidence of animal or human waste contamination consult your local public health unit for information immediately

If your well water tests positive

Immediate measures

- Stop using the well water.
- If you want to continue to use your well water, bring it to a rolling boil for at least one minute before using it for drinking, making infant formula, juices, ice or recipes, brushing your teeth, rinsing contact lenses, and washing food or dishes. Your boiled water supply should always be refrigerated until it is used.
- Consider using alternative water sources such as bottled water or municipal supply if available.

Longer-term measures

- Disinfect your well and entire household plumbing system. Refer to the [Disinfection Instruction Sheet](#) for more information.
- Have your well water re-tested to confirm that your water supply doesn't contain disease-causing bacteria and now meets the Ontario Drinking Water Standards.
- Chronic, ongoing problems may mean you need to have your well and plumbing system professionally inspected. This will help to determine possible reasons for the poor water quality results, such as surface water entering the top of the well. Contact a licensed well professional to help you with this task. (Long-term water treatment options are also available in [Choosing a Water Treatment System](#)).
- Contact your local [public health unit](#) or the Ontario Ministry of the Environment for more assistance.
- Consider replacing the existing well with a new well that meets present-day well construction practices.

See also :

- [Water Safety During an Electrical Power Blackout](#)
- [Boil Water / Drinking Water Advisory](#)
- [Get Acquainted with Your Well](#)
- [Pathogens and Your Well Water](#)
- [Disinfection Instruction Sheet](#)
- [Keeping Your Well Water Safe to Drink](#)
- [Choosing a Water Treatment System](#)

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Call the ministry **INFOline** at 1-866-532-3161
(Toll-free in Ontario only)
TTY 1-800-387-5559

[Ministry of the Environment](#)
Information Centre : 1-800-565-4923
Water Well Records : 1-888-396-9355

Hours of operation : 8:30am - 5:00pm

[Ministry of Agriculture and Food](#)

OMAF Agricultural Information Contact Centre :

1-877-424-1300

▲ TOP

| [return to publications menu](#) | [return to water safety menu](#)

| [home](#) | [central site](#) | [contact us](#) | [site map](#) | [français](#) |



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