

Is Your Well Water Safe to Drink?

If your family gets drinking water from a private well, do you know if your water is safe to drink? What health risks could you and your family face? Where can you go for help or advice?



The EPA regulates public water systems; it does not have the authority to regulate private drinking water wells. Approximately 15% of Americans rely on their own private drinking water supplies, and these supplies are not subject to EPA standards, although some state and local governments do set rules to protect users of these wells. Unlike public drinking water systems serving many people, they do not have experts regularly checking the water's source and its quality before it is sent to the tap. These households must take special precautions to ensure the protection and maintenance of their drinking water supplies.

Basic Information

Proper well construction and continued maintenance are keys to the safety of your water supply. Your state water-well contractor licensing agency, local health department, or local water system professional can provide information on well construction. The well should be located so rainwater flows away from it. Rainwater can pick up harmful bacteria and chemicals on the land's surface. If this water pools near your well, it can seep into it, potentially causing health problems. Water-well drillers and pump-well installers should be bonded and insured.

To keep your well safe, you must be sure possible sources of contamination are not close by. Experts suggest the following distances as a minimum for protection — farther is better:

- Septic Tanks, 50 ft.
- Livestock yards, Silos, and Septic Leach Fields, 50 ft.
- Petroleum Tanks, Liquid-Tight Manure Storage and Fertilizer Storage and Handling, 100 ft.
- Manure Stacks, 250 ft.

Many homeowners tend to forget the value of good maintenance until problems reach crisis levels which can be expensive. It's better to maintain your well, find problems early, and correct them to protect your well's performance. Keep up-to-date records of well installation and repairs plus pumping and water tests. Such records can help spot changes and possible problems with your water system.

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What You Can Do

Private, individual wells are the responsibility of the homeowner. To help protect your well, here are some steps you can take:

- Have your water tested periodically. It is recommended that water be tested every year for total coliform bacteria, nitrates, total dissolved solids, and pH levels. If you suspect other contaminants, test for those. Test them more frequently if you suspect a problem.
- Be aware of activities in your watershed that may affect the water quality of your well, especially if you live in an unsewered area. Always use a state certified laboratory that conducts drinking water tests.

Testing more than once a year may be warranted in special situations:

- someone in your household is pregnant or nursing;
- there are unexplained illnesses in the family ;
- your neighbors find a dangerous contaminant in their water;
- you note a change in water taste, odor, color or clarity;
- there is a spill of chemicals or fuels into or near your well;
- when you replace or repair any part of your well system.

Identify Potential Problem Sources

To start your search for potential problems, begin close to home. Do a survey around your well:

- is there livestock nearby?
- are pesticides being used on nearby agricultural crops or nurseries?
- do you use lawn fertilizers near the well?
- is your well "downstream" from your own or a neighbor's septic system?
- is your well located near a road that is frequently salted or sprayed with de-icers during winter months?
- do you or your neighbors dispose of household wastes or used motor oil in the backyard, even in small amounts?

If any of these items apply, it may be best to have your water tested and talk to your local public health department or agricultural extension agent to find way to change some of the practices which can affect your private well.



ASK THE INSPECTOR

Now that it looks like summer might actually happen, should we consider sealing our concrete?

Erick's Response:

Concrete sealers penetrate up to an inch into the porous surface, forming an impervious barrier. Sealing not only helps prevent water damage, but it also helps keep stains from soaking into the concrete. Before sealing, the surface must be completely clean and totally dry. For cleaning oil stains, use a solution of a tri-sodium phosphate available from any home center or try scrubbing with fresh kitty litter.

Apply the sealer following the manufacturer's instructions with a paint roller or a garden sprayer. The concrete will need to be resealed every few years if it's exposed to weather. Different sealers have different application methods and precautions. Be sure to read the label carefully.

Fan Facts

Experts say a ceiling fan can save up to 40% on your summer cooling costs, and up to 10% during the winter heating season. In summer, ceiling fans cool the room by creating a "wind chill effect." For example, if you had a ceiling fan in a room that was 85°, the fan would make the room feel like 78°. During colder weather, by using the 'reverse' setting the ceiling fan saves energy by circulating hot air that rises to the ceiling and blowing it back down into the room.