

Cook County Department of Public Health

Frequently Asked Questions about Operating Under a Boil Order

What does a boil order mean?

It means the water that comes out of the tap should not be used for drinking, brushing your teeth, cooking or washing fruits and vegetables. You should use bottled water for these activities.

How long should I boil my water for?

The affected tap water should be brought to a rolling boil for 3-5 minutes before being used.

Why has the boil order been called?

A boil order has been issued to your water system because either recent testing has shown the presence of organisms that could cause illness (*e.g.*, fecal or *E. coli* bacteria), or technical/physical problems in the water system have significantly increased the possibility of bacterial contamination.

Can I drink the water?

During a boil order, only bottled water or water that has been boiled for 3-5 minutes should be consumed or used to wash dishes, wash fruits/vegetables, make ice cubes or brush teeth.

Can I wash my hands with this water?

The Cook County Department of Public Health recommends that bottled water or water boiled for 3-5 minutes should be used for hand washing. When this is not practical, it is recommended that if tap water must be used to wash and rinse, it should be followed up with the use of a hand sanitizer. Consuming unsafe water is the most likely way to become ill. Using extra precautions with hand washing ensures that hands are clean for eating.

Can I shower or take a bath in this water?

Yes, it is safe to shower or bathe in the water. The primary concern is that the water not be consumed. Instruct children not to put the water in their mouth when they are bathing. When bathing infants, extra precaution should be taken and the Cook County Department of Public Health recommends the use of bottled water or water that has been boiled for 3-5 minutes and cooled for use.

How do I wash my dishes?

Use bottled water or water that has been boiled for 3-5 minutes to wash and rinse dishes. Home dishwashers can not be assured to completely kill organisms that may be in the water.

Can I wash my clothes in the water?

Yes, you may continue to use the water to wash clothes. The major concern is consuming the water.

Is it safe to eat in restaurants under a boil order?

The local municipality is responsible for checking area restaurants to confirm that safe practices are being followed. Special procedures are required for them to ensure that food preparation and handling is done in a safe manner. Additional procedures are also required to provide safe dishwashing.

What do we need to do when the boil order is lifted?

When the order is lifted you should flush the buildings water lines and clean the faucet screens. Also, purge water-using fixtures and appliances of standing water and/or ice. This includes changing the water filter on refrigerators.

Are swimming pools safe?

They are safe as long as proper levels of treatment are maintained. Water from swimming pools should never be consumed.

Can my pets drink the water?

Animals generally are not affected in the same way as people by contaminants in the water. An individual may give their pet bottled water or water that has been boiled for 3-5 minutes and cooled if they choose. Fish tanks should not be affected.

Is it safe to breast feed during the boil order after bathing in the water?

Cleaning the breast area with soap and bottled water or water boiled for 3-5 minutes and cooled prior to feeding will provide assurance that the child not ingest contaminants that may be on the skin.

I am on a well, am I affected?

Anyone who receives a bill for water services from the local municipality that is under a boil order should observe the boil order.

Are vending machines that mix drinks safe? (Coffee, Tea & Hot Chocolate machines)

These machines that use tap water should not be used until the boil order has been lifted.

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 water-borne 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 long will the boil order remain in effect?

Each boil order situation is different, making it impossible to predict how long the boil order will remain in effect. It will not be lifted until testing shows that the water meets public health standards. Your local water system will notify you when the boil order is lifted.