

## Boil Order Frequently asked questions

This document is to provide guidance to consumers of a public water system under a boil order.

### **Water Usage**

#### **What is a boil order?**

A boil order is issued by the operator in charge of a public water supply any time there is a **possibility** of bacterial contamination in the public water supply. This most frequently happens if a line breaks or during a line repair, but could happen if routine water sampling test results show bacteria. A boil order does not necessarily mean that there **is** contamination, only that there **could be** contamination. A boil order in the case of a main break or repair is a precautionary measure that is implemented until a water sample can be tested at a laboratory to determine if there is bacteria present.

#### **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, e.g., fecal or *E. coli* bacteria, or technical/physical problems in the water system have significantly increased the possibility of bacterial contamination. Bringing water above the boiling point of water (212° Fahrenheit) kills any bacteria that are present so that they do not pose a health risk to the consumer of the water.

#### **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 3-5 minutes. When it cools, refrigerate the water in clean containers. (A pinch of salt per quart may improve the rather “flat” taste of boiled water.) If you do not 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.

#### **Can I use bottled water?**

Buying bottled water may be a feasible alternative to boiling water. Bottled water operations are routinely inspected, and samples are periodically analyzed to ensure they meet health standards.

#### **During a Boil Order, can I use my tap water for...?**

Drinking.....No

Ice cubes.....No, and existing ice cubes should be  
thrown out. See below for information  
on ice machines.

Brushing teeth.....No

Baby’s formula.....No

Washing fruit/vegetables.....No

Preparing food.....No

Coffee, tea, lemonade, etc.....No. See next page for information on soda dispensers and coffee makers.

Laundry.....Yes

Watering grass or garden.....Yes, but fruits/vegetables must be washed using pre-boiled or bottled water before consumption.

Washing hands.....See next page

Showers or baths.....See next page

Washing dishes.....See next page

### **Can I wash my hands using tap water?**

It is recommended that you wash your hands using soap and either bottled water or pre-boiled water. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer may also be used.

### **Can my family take showers or baths using tap water?**

Adults may continue to shower as long as no water is swallowed. Sponge baths are recommended for children using a clean supply of water if possible. After you bathe or shower, wash your hands in chlorinated or bottled/boiled water.

People with open wounds or who are immuno-compromised should avoid showering in contaminated tap water.

### **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:

- Wash the dishes as you normally would.
- 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.
- Allow the dishes to completely air dry

### **Can I give my pet tap water?**

Although pets are not normally affected by the same diseases as humans, caution suggests giving pets pre-boiled or bottled water.

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

The Health Department 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.

### **Are swimming pools safe?**

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

### **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 does not ingest contaminants that may be on the skin.

### **What should I do once the boil order has been lifted?**

Boil orders are lifted once the water sample has been determined in the lab to contain no bacteria. Therefore, once the boil order is lifted, you may resume normal use of the water supply. However, boil orders are typically issued when there has been disturbance in some portion of the water supply lines. Disturbances may stir up sediments in the water lines and allow them to be distributed to your water faucets. It is recommended that you flush your lines by running the water for at least three minutes before using the water for the first time following a boil order. You should also clean your faucet aerator screens to remove any sediments. Following these precautions should reduce the potential of exposure to any sediments including lead.

## **Health Related Information**

### **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. Water sample results are available at the public water supply after the results are returned from the laboratory. The results indicate if bacteria was found in the water sample.

**A note about *E. coli* bacteria:** *E. coli* is a sub-group of the fecal coliform bacteria group. There are many strains of *E. coli*, most of which are harmless, but some strains can cause illness. *E. coli* outbreaks receive much media coverage. Most outbreaks have been related to food contamination (not water) caused by a specific strain of *E. coli* O157:H7. When a drinking water sample is reported as “*E. coli* positive,” it does not mean that this specific strain is present and in fact, it is probably not present. However, it does indicate recent fecal contamination. Boiling or

treating contaminated drinking water with a disinfectant destroys all forms of *E. coli*, including O157:H7.

### **General Information**

#### **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. Each water sample taken to the laboratory must be incubated for several hours to perform the test. There are no shortcuts to the testing time. The water sampling laboratory will notify the City of Tuscola when the boil order can be lifted, and the City will, in turn, notify you.

#### **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. Private well water should never be connected to a public water supply.

### **For Additional Information**

- For personal medical questions, contact your health care provider.
- For specific information about your particular water system, contact the City of Tuscola 217-253-2112.
- For more information regarding *E. coli* bacteria visit: [www.epa.gov/safewater/ecoli.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/ecoli.html)