

Environmental Health Division • Drinking Water Program

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**Arsenic in Drinking Water
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

This document is intended to address issues and concerns surrounding the potential presence of arsenic in drinking water in small water systems and private drinking water wells.

California has adopted the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) federal standards for arsenic in drinking water. A drinking water standard, called a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL), establishes a limit on the concentration of a contaminant in drinking water. The MCL for arsenic in drinking water is 10 parts per billion (ppb).

Question: What is arsenic?

Answer: Arsenic is a naturally occurring toxic chemical element which is widely found throughout the earth's crust in soil, rocks and minerals. It is also a by-product of certain agricultural and industrial processes. Arsenic is odorless, tasteless, and colorless when dissolved in water (even at high concentrations) and can only be detected through chemical analysis.

Question: How does arsenic get into drinking water?

Answer: Arsenic enters lakes, rivers and underground water naturally when mineral deposits such as rocks containing arsenic erode and dissolve. It may also enter the groundwater through the discharge of industrial and agricultural waste products.

Question: Is arsenic in drinking water regulated?

Answer: Yes. In 1974 Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act. This law, which was incorporated into the California Health & Safety Code, regulates public water systems and establishes Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs) for chemicals in water which may pose a risk to human health. These threshold/elevated levels are expressed as standards and public water providers are required to comply with these standards. The Standard or MCL for arsenic in drinking water is 10 ppb.

Question: How do I know if there is arsenic in my water?

Answer: If you are connected to a public water system, you should check with the operator of that system to determine if there is arsenic in your water. If you are on a private well or an unregulated water system (less than 5 connections), you should have your water tested.

DPH recommends testing your water for bacteria and toxins (like arsenic) to ensure your water supply is safe. Refer to the State Department of Public Health Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (ELAP) for a list of certified laboratories that are qualified to do such testing, at www.cdph.ca.gov/certlic/labs/Documents/ELAPLablist.xls.

Question: What do I do if there are elevated arsenic levels in my water?

Answer: Water for drinking and cooking should come from an approved source of water or bottled water. Do not attempt to remove arsenic by boiling the water. Water treatment may be used for the mitigation of contaminant MCLs. As a homeowner that has their own water well, you may consider utilizing a Point of Use - under sink water treatment device. Please refer to the California Department of Public Health Drinking Water Division (CDPH) and the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) for more information on treatment at www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/Pages/DDWEM.aspx and www.nsf.org/services/by-industry/water-wastewater/residential-water-treatment

Question: What are the health effects of arsenic?

Answer: Arsenic is a known human carcinogen (cancer causing agent) and consumption of arsenic may cause short-term and/or long-term health effects, depending on the dose and the time period of exposure. Arsenic may cause cancer with extensive exposure over one's lifetime. Arsenic may also cause non-cancerous diseases in the bladder, lungs, skin, kidneys, nasal passages, liver, and prostate under certain exposure circumstances.

Note, health effects from arsenic, including cancer, are not expected to occur from consumption of drinking water from water supplies that are in compliance with the arsenic drinking water standard.

Question: What is the role of the County Department of Public Health in protecting the water supply in small water systems and private drinking water wells?

Answer: As the regulatory agency for small water systems and private well permitting, DPH is responsible for enforcing State and local codes which govern all new and reconstructed wells. These codes require new and reconstructed wells to be in compliance with bacteriological and chemical regulations designed to ensure the safety of drinking water supply for human consumption. Small water systems are tested routinely for compliance with drinking water standards and directed to take corrective actions if MCLs are exceeded. Private well owners are to verify compliance with drinking water standards before a Health Permit can be issued.

Question: How can I find out more information about this issue?

Answer: For more information about this subject contact the following resources:

- Safe Drinking Water Hotline 1-800 426-4791
- Arsenic in Drinking Water <http://www.epa.gov/safewater/arsenic>
- Arsenic Health Effects <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/phs2.html>
- Your Private Well <http://www.epa.gov/safewater/privatewell>

FAQs Arsenic in Drinking Water
October 2013

- CA Department of Public Health
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/certlic/drinkingwater/Pages/Asenic.aspx>
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Environmental Health – Drinking Water Program 626.430.5420 or email: waterquality@ph.lacounty.gov