





DRINKING WATER

The Government has set legal standards for drinking water in the Water Quality Regulations. There are standards for:

-  bacteria
-  chemicals such as nitrate and pesticides
-  metals such as lead
-  the way water looks and how it tastes

Drinking water is of a very high quality. In 2000, the water companies in England and Wales carried out approximately 2.7 million tests on drinking water samples of which 99.83% passed.

What about the failures to meet the standards?

Bacteria - Chlorine has been used to disinfect drinking water for more than a hundred years. Not all bacteria are harmful and some are easily detected.

Pesticides - traces of pesticides can be found in some drinking water. They come from their use by farmers, gardeners and highway authorities.

Lead - lead is commonly found in the environment. It comes from a variety of sources including some vehicle exhausts and pre-mid 1960's paintwork and may be present in air, food, soil or water. In drinking water it mostly comes from the pipes in people's houses.

Nitrate - this comes from fertilizers and too much nitrate can sometimes be harmful to very young babies. There is a safety margin built into the standards for nitrate so that even if it is breached, babies' health is unlikely to be harmed.

Iron - this is something which people complain about frequently because iron can discolour water. It comes from rusty water mains. Even if water looks a very reddish brown colour it is unlikely to harm your health.

Cryptosporidium - this is a micro-organism found in man and many other animals and can cause a disease call cryptosporidiosis. In humans, cryptosporidiosis is a diarrhoeal illness usually lasting about two weeks from which most people fully recover. Water can be a source of the organism as can food, milk, contact with animals, particularly lambs and calves, other infected persons and swimming pools. Water companies have had to assess each of their water treatment works for risk from cryptosporidium. From April 2000, they were required by law to sample continuously, and analyse daily, to monitor the effectiveness of the treatment at those sites which have potential vulnerability.

What should I do if there is a problem with my water supply?

Contact your water company. Enquiry and emergency numbers are listed under WATER in your telephone directory.

Or contact your local OFWAT Customer Service Committee listed under Consumer Organisations in your telephone directory.

Or contact your Environmental Health Department of your local authority.

Or contact the Drinking Water Inspectorate, which is a team of professionals with a wide range of experience and expert knowledge in all aspects of water supply. This includes chemistry, microbiology and engineering. On health matters, they get advice from the Government's Chief Medical Officer. Their job is to check that the water companies in England and Wales supply water that is safe to drink and meets the standards set in the Water Quality Regulations.