



## Drinking Water and Those with Weakened Immune Systems

Some people with very weak immune systems may be at higher risk of water-borne infections. This file provides information about how to help prevent water-borne infections.

People who have significantly weakened immune systems and who are at higher risk of certain water-borne diseases include:

- People with HIV infection who have a CD4+ count of < 100 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>.
- People with hematological malignancies (lymphoma or leukemia) who are being actively treated or have been in remission and off treatment for less than 1 year.
- Hematopoietic stem cell transplant recipients.
- People born with diseases that severely affect their immune systems.

Some people with weakened immune systems, such as those with certain types of cancers or taking certain medications, may not be at higher risk of severe water-borne diseases. These people do not need to take extra precautions with their drinking water.

Ask your doctor or specialist how weak your immune system is, and whether you need to take extra precautions.

### Diseases from drinking water

Drinking water can contain different organisms, including bacteria, viruses and parasites, which can cause disease. These organisms can exist in the source water such as lake water and survive through treatment, or they can enter the water supply in the distribution system. Well water can be contaminated if the well is not built properly or if it draws on water from the surface of the

ground, such as shallow wells or wells drilled in fractured rock. Surface water, such as rivers, lakes and streams, can also contain disease-causing organisms from animal feces.

If you have a weak immune system, you should not drink water from surface sources or wells potentially contaminated by surface water (for example, dug wells), unless the water has been treated to remove or inactivate at least 99.9% of parasites (protozoa), 99.99% of viruses and 100% of harmful bacteria.

Most community water systems in B.C. have effective treatment, such as disinfection or chlorination, against bacteria and viruses. However, in many cases, treatment may not provide a 99.9% reduction in infectious parasites. Furthermore, some water systems and many private supplies have no treatment at all. If the water you drink has not been disinfected, please refer to HealthLink BC File [#49b How to Disinfect Drinking Water](#).

To further treat drinking water that has been disinfected, consider the methods listed below.

### Options for water treatment

**Boiling:** If your water supply is disinfected you need only bring the water to a full boil to inactivate any *Cryptosporidium* parasites - a major concern for immunocompromised people, as there is no medical treatment for this parasite.

If the water is not yet disinfected, it's recommended you bring water to a full boil for at least one minute as the best way to kill or inactivate bacteria, viruses and parasites.

At elevations over 2,000 meters [6,500 feet], you should boil water for at least two minutes to disinfect it. In this situation, you should not drink or use tap water to brush your teeth, rinse your mouth, mix drinks or make ice cubes without boiling it first.

If you are preparing infant formula, please see HealthLink BC File [#69b Formula Feeding Your Baby: Safely Preparing and Storing Formula](#). Please note that boiling water will get rid of viruses, bacteria and parasites but not chemicals which may be found in the water. For more information, please contact the environmental health officer or drinking water officer at your nearest public health unit.

**Filters:** If you plan to install a drinking water filter in your home, you will need a system labeled as "Absolute" 1 micron or smaller, and labeled as meeting ANSI/NSF International Standard #53 for removal of parasites. These are *not* suitable for removing bacteria and viruses and should *not* be used *unless* the water supply is at least disinfected first.

Jug-type filters, which sit in a jug and allow water to trickle through, and some tap-mounted and built-in devices are not an appropriate solution. The jug filter models are *not* effective in removing many disease-causing organisms.

**Reverse Osmosis (RO):** RO is effective against all disease-causing organisms and many chemical contaminants. Unless it has a high capacity, it will only produce small amounts of water and waste a large volume. Speak to a water treatment specialist to see if this is the best option for you.

**Ultraviolet (UV) Treatment:** UV light will kill many disease-causing organisms, and it is effective against almost all parasites. UV will not kill some bacterial spores and some viruses, so it should *not* be used *unless* the water supply is at least disinfected. UV

treatment units should meet NSF Standard #55A.

### Bottled water

If you do not want to drink water from the tap, you may also choose to buy bottled water that has been treated adequately. Most bottled water in B.C. has had RO treatment, but not all has been treated. You should check with the water bottler to find out what treatment it has had. You can still use tap water for cooking as long as you boil it. You can use bottled water treated by reverse osmosis for drinking, brushing teeth, making ice cubes and for recipes where water is used but not boiled such as cold soups or salad dressings.

For more information, including the level of treatment in your local water system, please contact your drinking water purveyor or supplier or the local environmental health officer or drinking water officer. Please also see the following HealthLink BC Files.

[#49a Water-borne Diseases in BC](#)

[#49b How to Disinfect Drinking Water](#)

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm) or your local public health unit.

Click on [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

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