

What You Need To Know About Testing Your Well Water

Just because your water looks and smells OK doesn't really mean that it is OK. That's why it's important to have your well water tested.

Why Should I Test My Well Water?

Drinking unsafe water can make you sick and unsafe water can cause problems with your water system.

Wells should be tested on a regular basis so that changes in your drinking water quality can be followed.

Well water is made up of groundwater and surface water. Things that happen on the surface (farming, gardening, mining, and construction) can affect the water in your well.

When Should I Test My Well Water?

Wells should be tested at least once a year. Test more often if you are having problems. Test before putting in a water treatment device. Test after having work done on the well or plumbing system.

The best time to test your well is in the late spring (May or June) after a good rain. Make it a part of spring cleaning. Late spring is best because many things that could affect well water are happening then -- heavy rains, farming, construction, and surface water run-off.

What Should I Test For in a Basic Well Water Test?

1. Total Coliform Bacteria

- The sample **must** be received by the lab within 24 hours after it is taken.
- These bacteria are usually not a health problem. They let you know that other harmful bacteria and viruses may be in your well water.
- The presence of bacteria and viruses can lead to diarrhea, stomach aches, cramps, and serious illnesses.
- If bacteria are present you may need to shock chlorinate your well and plumbing system.

2. Acidity (pH)

- If the pH is above 8.5, the water may have a bad taste and cause scaling on pipes and faucets. A water softener may be helpful.
- If the pH is below 6.5 the pipes may wear away.

3. Total Dissolved Solids

- This tests for decayed plants, minerals, and metals in the water.
- Regular tests will let you know if something new is getting in your well water.

4. Hardness

- Hardness is not a health problem.
- Testing your well for hardness actually measures calcium and magnesium in the water.
- Water that is too hard does not let cleaning products work right and causes scale buildup on sinks and pipes. Hard water can cause water treatment equipment to not work right.
- Nitrate can be found in most soils and can end up in your well water.
- Levels that are too high can come from use of fertilizer, animal pens, or septic systems near the well.
- Levels too high can be harmful. Babies under the age of 6 months are most at risk.

Where Should I Get My Well Water Tested?

You should use a state certified lab. Some health departments do water testing.

Shop around -- prices vary from lab to lab. Call the EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791 or the Compliance and Technical Assistance Branch at (502) 564-3410 for a free list or visit your county Extension office.

Use the bottles the lab gives you for the samples. Follow their directions for taking the samples.

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