Grey Bruce Public Health

Frequently Asked Questions: Boil Water Advisories

What is a Boil Water Advisory?

A boil water advisory notifies people whose homes and/or businesses are connected to an affected water system that they should boil their tap water before drinking it or using it for other purposes, as noted below.

These measures aim to protect public health from issues that may make the drinking water unsafe to consume.

A boil water advisory may be issued if there are unacceptable levels of disease-causing bacteria, viruses, or parasites in the water or concerns about the cloudiness (turbidity) of the water at its source. An advisory may also be issued as a precaution – if there are concerns that the water may become contaminated (e.g., local emergency repairs in the distribution system).

People who use the water system should always follow recommendations from the water system operator and local Public Health Unit on safe water use.

How can I make my tap water safe to drink during a Boil Water Advisory?

Water should be brought to a rolling boil for 1 minute. Refrigerate boiled water until it is used.

You can also use alternate water sources, such as bottled water.

Is it necessary to boil all water in the home during an advisory or order?

During boil water advisories or boil water orders, you should boil all water used for drinking, preparing food, beverages, ice cubes, washing fruits and vegetables, or brushing teeth. Infant formulas should be prepared using boiled tap water, at all times.

You don't have to boil tap water used for other household purposes, such as showering, laundry, bathing, or washing dishes. Adults, teens, and older children can wash, bathe, or shower; however, they should avoid swallowing the water. Toddlers and infants should be sponge-bathed.

If I have a water treatment device, do I still need to boil my drinking water?

If the device is designed to improve the taste, odour, or chemical quality of the water, such as with activated carbon filters, it is still necessary to boil the water.

Devices designed to disinfect the water, such as a UV light units, may be used as an alternative to boiling. If the water is cloudy, filtration may be required before disinfection. In any case, filters may have to be washed and disinfected or replaced. Check with the manufacturer if you are not sure.

Can I use the water for hand washing?

If the boil water order has been issued as a precaution and there is no outbreak of human illness, there is no need for additional hand sanitizing with alcohol-based hand rub. If you use an alcohol-based hand rub, ensure it contains between 60-90% alcohol (e.g., ethanol, isopropanol).

How should I wash dishes?

Your domestic dishwasher may not adequately disinfect the dishes. If dishes are washed by hand, they should be washed and rinsed in hot tap water, then soaked in a dilute solution of household bleach (20 milliliters of bleach in 10 litres of water) for 1 minute, and air-dried.

How should I clean and disinfect my children's toys?

If the toys are visibly soiled, wash them first with soap and potable water and then disinfect with a freshly prepared bleach solution of 20 ml of regular unscented bleach to 2 litres of water for 2 minutes. This recipe is based on a recipe of 5.25% sodium hypochlorite; check the bottle of bleach to find out the concentration. Cloth and plush toys can be washed by hand or in a washing machine, or dry-cleaned.

When is a boil water advisory or order lifted?

Boil water advisories or boil water orders are usually lifted by the responsible authority or water utility when the water is considered safe and no longer poses a threat to public health.

What should I do when the boil water advisory or order has been lifted?

The responsible authority or water utility will provide instructions on flushing water pipes within the home. It is important to carefully follow the instructions provided.

Water heaters may need to be disinfected and flushed to remove any contaminated water. Some types of water treatment devices may need to be disinfected or replaced before being used. Check with the manufacturer for details.

Reference:
Health Canada. (2008). Boil Water Advisories and Boil Water Orders. Retrieved July 22, 2013 from http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/pubs/water-eau/boil-ebullition-eng.php
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013). Personal Preparation and Storage of Safe Water. Retrieved July 22, 2013 from http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/emergency/safe_water/personal.html#make_safe