

BOIL WATER EVENTS

Frequently Asked Questions from Food Service Establishments

Questions from restaurants, bakeries, delis, and other food service establishments often arise during a boil water event. Below are answers to questions that are commonly asked.

Q1 - Why was a boil water notice issued for my water?

A boil water notice is issued by water utilities and health agencies to protect consumers from potentially contaminated drinking water. Boil water responses are typically used when a condition has occurred that creates a potential for biological contamination in water within the drinking water distribution system, or when water samples indicate that contamination is present. Common reasons for a boil water notice include loss of pressure in the distribution system and unexpected water quality problems. These may in turn be the result of other events such as water line breaks, treatment disruptions, power outages, floods and other forms of severe weather.

Your water utility and your local health department office can give you details on if and why a boil water notice was issued for your water supply.

Q2 - How long will the need to boil water continue?

Typically a boil water event lasts for 48 hours, but this can be longer and the need to boil water may last for several days or more. Your water utility and/or local health office will advise you when it is safe to return to normal water use. How long will depend on the conditions that caused the need to boil, how quickly the conditions can be corrected, and how long it takes for laboratory results to confirm that your water is again safe to drink.

Your water utility and your local health department office can give you details on how long your boil water notice might last. Public notification will be given when the boil water notice has been lifted.

Q3 - Must I close due to Boil Water Order/notice?

If the water supply serving a food service establishment becomes contaminated, the safest response is to shut down the operation. However, this may not always be practical. Unless the Health Department specifically directs otherwise, you can stay in operation as long as you are able to fully protect your customers and staff from exposure to the potentially contaminated water.

If you stay open, it is your responsibility to take whatever steps are needed to protect your customers. In addition to boiling water or using alternate water sources, these may include:

- Change the menu to remove items that are difficult to prepare with limited water
- Add menu items that require little or no water for preparation
- Change food sources, switch to pre-washed produce, canned vegetables, and bottled drinks

- Use single-service tableware
- Discontinue use of post-mix beverage equipment
- Make sure all staff, on all shifts, understand and implement all needed protective measures

Please refer to the food safety during a boil water order/notice pamphlet for additional details.

Q4 - What is the proper way to disinfect my water so that it is safe to drink?

The recommended method is boiling. Boiling water is the most sure method you can use at home to kill harmful waterborne bacteria, viruses and parasites. Bring water to a **FULL ROLLING BOIL for 1 MINUTE**, then allow the water to **COOL BEFORE USE**.

Because water may take 20 or 30 minutes to fully cool, plan ahead. Make up a number of batches of boiled water in advance that is sufficient to meet your demands so you will not need to use it hot and risk scalds or burns.

Q5 - Can I use the beverage fountain?

Do not use POST-MIX soda - use canned soda.

Q6 - What about the post-mix machine?

The Post-Mix machine should be should drained and disconnected from the water line and should not be reconnected until the lines and machine are properly flushed and disinfected (per the manufacturer's directions) after the boil water order/notice has been lifted. To ensure that all staff are aware of the post-mix restriction, place a legible sign on the post-mix machine that says "Do Not Use".

If there is ice in this machine, see the following questions and answers regarding ice and ice machines.

Q7 - Can I use my ice?

Bagged or prepackaged ice made from a potable water source that is not under a boil water order/notice may be used. Ice from your ice maker may be used **if** it can be positively confirmed that it was **all** made well in advance of the boil water order/notice. Any ice made since the boil water order/notice was issued, any ice whose age is uncertain, and any ice mixed with ice whose age is uncertain, must not be consumed or used in food preparation.

It is best to label ice as safe or unsafe and discard unsafe ice to prevent accidental use, unless it has a critical use (i.e. cooling raw food in a power outage). Unsafe ice should not be placed into direct contact with any food items (such as in seafood display coolers).

Q8 - What about the ice machine?

The ice machine should be disconnected from the water line, drained and should not be reconnected until the lines and machine are properly flushed and disinfected (per the manufacturer's directions) after the order/notice has been lifted.

Q9 - Can I use the water to wash produce?

All water used to wash produce or to cook with must be boiled (and then cooled). Alternately, water for an acceptable alternate source can be used (i.e. bottled water), or water for washing and rinsing can be made by chemical disinfection using ordinary unscented chlorine bleach.

Wash water for dishes and utensils can be prepared by adding 1 teaspoon of bleach (5.25%) per gallon of water.

Q10 - Can I use the water to cook with?

Any water used for food preparation or cooking needs to be bottled water or boiled first.

Q11 - What if I am boiling the water as part of the cooking process?

Heating and the boiling of the water during cooking for commercial establishments is not acceptable. There is an increased potential for organism and bacteria to not be completely eliminated from the water with this approach and multiple people may be exposed at a commercial establishment.

Q12 - Can I use food prepared with water during the boil water order/notice?

Any food that was prepared or washed with the contaminated water should be discarded.

Q13 - Can I use the water to wash the floors and walls?

Cleaning floors, walls, and other nonfood contact surfaces may be done using the contaminated water, unless the Health Department issues a special order/notice prohibiting this.

Q14 - Can my employees use the water for hand washing?

Yes. Employees must be certain that hands are completely dried prior to returning to work so that potentially contaminated water is not accidentally introduced into the food preparation processes at the establishment.

Use of antimicrobial products that do not require water for use (e.g., alcohol-based hand rubs) are less effective.

Q15 - What should I do about sinks and fountains?

Signs should be posted on all fountains and sinks that legibly state “Do Not Drink”. All fountains and sinks accessible to the public should be shut off at their emergency shut off valve, if possible.

Q16 - What about sinks in washrooms?

Bottled water, boiled and completely cooled water should be provided for use. If sanitary facilities cannot be provided, the establishment should be closed unless it is a critical facility.

Q17 - Can I use hand sanitizing lotion or wipes?

Alcohol based sanitizers work against many common disease causing agents (E. coli, salmonella, and campylobacter), but are not as effective as proper hand washing with soap and water. Hand sanitizing wipes are not effective for cryptosporidium and some bacterium spores.

Q18 - What must I do when I reopen?

Food/beverage vending equipment and food contact surfaces must be cleaned with a disinfectant solution.

All Equipment must be flushed and disinfected per the manufacturer's recommendations.

Residential style appliances must also be flushed and disinfected.

Q15 - Is potentially contaminated water safe for washing dishes?

Hand-washed dishes: Yes, if rinsed for a minute in dilute bleach (1 tablespoon per gallon of water). Allow dishes, cutlery, cups, etc. to completely air dry before use.

Home dishwasher: Yes, however as most home-style dishwashers do not reach 170° F and do not include a disinfectant rinse you must add a rinse procedure (in dilute bleach as described above for hand washed dishes) at the end of the cycle. Allow dishes, cutlery, cups, etc. to completely air dry before use.

Commercial dishwasher: Yes, if it is a NSF listed washer and manufactured and operated with a hot wash (170°) at least 8 minutes in duration and uses a disinfectant rinse.

CAUTION - “Green” or “Environmentally Friendly” dish washer rinse additives, which may be advertised as a disinfectant or anti-microbial, are weaker disinfectants and should not be relied on alone to eliminate potential pathogens.