FACTS

Disinfection By-Products in Drinking Water
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The protection of our nation’s drinking water supply has been a priority for many years. In fact, a major accomplishment in public health during this century has been the chlorination of public drinking water supplies. This practice has greatly reduced serious illness and death associated with many waterborne diseases, such as cholera and typhoid.

We are often reminded of the important role that chlorination plays in protecting the public each time we hear about an outbreak of waterborne disease resulting from inadequate disinfection. But, as with many issues, it sometimes becomes necessary to weigh the benefits against the potential risks. The presence of disinfection by-products in drinking water supplies, formed when chlorine reacts with natural organic materials in water, has raised concerns about the overall safety of chlorination.

As a result, many members of the drinking water protection community have been actively working to more clearly understand the possible health problems from exposure to disinfection by-products, *while at the same time* ensuring a high level of protection against waterborne diseases.

Meanwhile, federal and state governments have taken steps to protect the public from the potential health risks from disinfection by-products by conducting health effects research, strengthening drinking water regulations, and supporting improvements in water treatment technology.
Disinfection by-products (DBPs) consist of a wide variety of chemicals that form when chlorine is added to drinking water during the treatment process. Chlorine is added to drinking water for disinfection purposes.

**DBPs include:**

- Trihalomethanes (THMs)
- Haloacetic Acids (HAAs)
- Haloacetonitriles (HANs)
- MX

Of these chemicals, THMs and HAAs are most often found in chlorinated drinking water. Others, such as HANs and MX, are formed in smaller amounts during the chlorination process. Still other DBPs have not yet been chemically identified.

Some water treatment plants use other types of drinking water disinfectants, such as ozone, chlorine dioxide, and monochloramine, usually in combination with chlorine. Each of these disinfectants produce their own group of by-products during the treatment process.
Chlorine is widely used during the water treatment process because it is very effective in destroying harmful bacteria and viruses. Disinfection of drinking water is one of the most important accomplishments of public health practice because it has resulted in a major reduction in cholera, typhoid, and other waterborne diseases.
**HOW CAN DBPS GET INTO YOUR DRINKING WATER?**

DBPs are formed when chlorine reacts with the natural, organic materials found in water, such as algae and decaying plants.

Organic materials can wash into surface water from surrounding lands, such as farms and wooded areas. Urban runoff also carries organic material into surface water when it rains. During the warmer months, surface water often contains a lot of organic material. As a result, DBP levels are generally higher in the summer and fall than other times of the year.

**THMs and HAAs are two families of related chemicals that contain different amounts of chlorine and bromine. During the water treatment process, bromine is formed when chlorine reacts with naturally-occurring bromide in the water. Bromine, like chlorine, can combine with organic material naturally found in water to form THMs and HAAs.**
Surface water, such as rivers, lakes and reservoirs, are likely to contain large amounts of organic materials, especially during the warmer months of the year. These materials can easily wash into the water from the surrounding land. As a result, drinking water from surface water supplies are likely to form DBPs after chlorine is added during water treatment.

Under certain conditions, groundwater can contain some organic materials. For example, organic materials may reach shallow wells that obtain water from close to the ground’s surface. Likewise, wells may draw in organic materials if they are located near surface water bodies. This is referred to as groundwater under the direct influence of surface water.

Groundwater, such as well water, does not commonly contain the organic materials necessary to form DBPs. And some public water suppliers do not chlorinate groundwater when it comes from a protected underground source. Therefore, the amount of DBPs in well water is usually very low, and in many cases, is so low it cannot even be measured.
Roundwater is unlikely to contain the organic materials needed to form DBPs as long as it comes from a protected underground supply. Also, well water does not usually need to be chlorinated on a regular basis.

Although DBPs are not commonly found in private well water, there are certain conditions under which they may be present:

- In some instances, it may be necessary to add chlorine to a well to make sure it is free of harmful bacteria. For example, a well should be disinfected following installation or repair work, or if it is found to be contaminated with disease-causing organisms. If chlorine is not properly flushed out of the system afterwards, DBPs can form in well water when organic material is present.

- DBPs can form in household septic systems when organic material reacts with chlorine based cleaning products. Water discharged from the septic system can enter into the underground water supply and nearby wells.

- Chlorine can get into groundwater from leaking in-ground swimming pools. DBPs can form in the underground water supply when chlorine reacts with organic material discharged from a nearby septic system and can enter a nearby well.
HOW CAN DBPS GET INTO YOUR BODY?

There are several ways that DBPs can get into your body:

- **DBPs can get into your body by drinking tap water.** People that get their drinking water from a surface water supply are more likely to be exposed to DBPs than those that get their water from a groundwater source.

- **DBPs can get into your body when you breathe.** Some DBPs can be released into the air in your home when you use your tap water. This can happen when you are taking a shower or washing dishes. And the hotter the water is, the more likely it is that DBPs will be released into the air. DBPs can also get into the air when you boil your tap water, such as when you make tea or soup.

- **DBPs can get into your body through your skin.** You can be exposed to DBPs when your skin comes into direct contact with water, such as when you are bathing or showering. But for most people, only very small amounts of DBPs get into the body through the skin. However, these amounts can increase to much higher levels as your contact time with water increases, for example, if you typically take long baths.
ARE DBPS HARMFUL TO YOUR HEALTH?

The health risks from exposure to low levels of DBPs in drinking water are not well understood:

- Some studies have found that people who drink chlorinated surface water have a higher risk of developing cancer of the bladder, rectum and colon.

- Other investigations have suggested that chlorinated drinking water may contribute to the risk of birth defects of the brain and spinal cord. Several studies have found that exposure to chlorinated surface water may result in reproductive health effects, such as low birthweight babies, premature births, and miscarriages.

- In some animal studies, exposure to very high levels of certain DBPs resulted in kidney and liver damage, reproductive effects, and cancer. But these effects occurred at levels that were much higher than those typically found in drinking water.

Additional research is in progress to further study if exposure to low levels of chlorinated water can cause harmful health effects in people.
Your public water supplier is required to test for THMs in your drinking water every 3 months. At least 4 samples collected over a 12 month period are used to determine an average THM level for the year. You can find out the results of these tests by contacting your water supplier or the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Safe Drinking Water (see page 18). Also, public water suppliers are now required to send information about the quality of their water to customers each year.

In 1999, certain large public water suppliers must start testing regularly for HAAs. Currently, there are no monitoring requirements for other DBPs in water supplies.

Private well water is unlikely to contain DBPs because it does not need to be chlorinated on a regular basis. And well water from protected underground sources does not usually contain the necessary organic materials to form DBPs. Contact your local health department for more information and guidance about whether private well testing is necessary based on your individual situation.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) has collected information on the presence of certain DBPs in large surface water systems in New Jersey. Contact the USEPA, Safe Drinking Water Hotline (see page 18) to request this information.
MCLs, developed by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, limit the amount of certain DBPs that can be present in public drinking water supplies. The MCLs for DBPs are listed in the following table. Beginning in 2003, some MCLs will be lowered for certain large public water systems in order to be more protective of public health. MCLs have not been set for all DBPs since there is not enough health effects information currently available to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contaminant</th>
<th>MCL¹</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THMs</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>HAAs</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HANs</td>
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<td>MX</td>
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¹ measured in parts per billion (ppb) or micrograms per liter (µg/l)
² Public water systems using surface water or ground water under the direct influence of surface water, and serve 10,000 or more people, must meet the MCL by 12/16/03

Source: Federal and NJ Drinking Water Standards, 11/96, 12/98

**IS THERE A SAFE LEVEL OF DBPS IN YOUR DRINKING WATER?**

Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs) have been established to protect the public from exposure to DBPs in chlorinated drinking water. They are set at levels that reduce the chances that harmful health effects will occur.
- If you have public water, your water supplier is required by law to test for THMs to make sure that average annual levels (based on 4 consecutive testing periods) do not exceed the MCL. If the MCL is exceeded, the water provider must lower THM levels to below the MCL within a time period sufficient to protect your health. Your water supplier can describe any steps they are taking to lower THMs in your drinking water.

- If you have a private well, you can use the MCLs as guidelines to determine if you need to take any steps to lower DBPs in your drinking water. Keep in mind that any chlorine added to a well for disinfection purposes can be removed by properly flushing out the system afterwards.
**WHAT STEPS ARE BEING TAKEN TO REDUCE DBP LEVELS IN PUBLIC DRINKING WATER?**

*Information Collection:* The USEPA, with the assistance of many large water suppliers in New Jersey, is gathering information about the amounts and types of DBPs that typically result from the disinfection of drinking water supplies. In addition, numerous health studies are being conducted to further investigate the possible links between harmful health effects and different amounts of DBPs in drinking water.

*Drinking Water Regulations:* Water quality information, along with the results of ongoing health effects research, will be used by federal and state government agencies to decide whether current drinking water regulations need to be strengthened or new regulations need to be developed to further protect the public from DBPs. Other regulatory approaches focus on improving drinking water quality by protecting water supplies at their source.

*Water Treatment Technology:* The USEPA is evaluating the effectiveness of different water treatment technologies in protecting the public from harmful organisms in drinking water while minimizing the formation of DBPs, such as through the use of chlorine alternatives (ozone, ultraviolet light) and the development of better water filtration methods.
Granulated activated carbon (GAC) filters are effective in lowering DBP levels in your drinking water. These filters are also capable of improving the taste and odor of your drinking water by removing chlorine.

Several types of GAC filters are available for home use. **Point-of-use filters** include those that are attached to the faucet itself or connected to the cold water line beneath the sink. Free-standing units are separate from the water supply but can only filter small amounts of water at one time. These filters do not totally eliminate exposure to DBPs in the water and the air since treatment is limited to only a portion of the household water supply. **Point-of-entry filters** treat all the water coming into the home and, therefore, are effective in preventing exposure to DBPs through ingestion and inhalation.

**Are there home water treatment devices for DBPs?**

While scientists continue to learn more about the possible health effects from DBPs in drinking water, certain home water treatment devices can be used to reduce your exposure:

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In order to ensure that your treatment device works properly, GAC filters must be replaced periodically according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Also, regular maintenance is needed to prevent bacterial growth. Contact NSF International for more information on home water treatment devices (see page 18).
Bottled water must meet the same drinking water standards as public water supplies. In general, bottled water that comes from a ground water supply is less likely to contain DBPs than bottled water from a surface water source. In New Jersey, bottled water companies are required to test the water regularly to make sure it meets standards and to identify the source of the water on the product label.

When deciding whether or not to purchase bottled water, keep in mind that bottled water usage will not reduce your exposure to volatile DBPs that get into the air when you use your tap water for non-drinking purposes. You can get more information about bottled water from the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, Consumer and Environmental Health Services, (609-588-3123), the International Bottled Water Association (800-928-3711), or by contacting the bottled water company directly.
WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM DBPs?

There are several simple steps you can take to reduce your exposure to DBPs:

**Use less water**
Take shorter showers and baths, and use shorter wash cycles for dishes and clothes. Some DBPs can evaporate or “volatilize” into the air in your home when you use the water.

**Use cooler water**
Reduce the amount of hot water that you use when you shower or bathe, and wash clothes. Volatile DBPs are more likely to get into the air in your home when the water is hot.

**Provide adequate ventilation**
Open windows or vent air to the outside during and after water use. Spend less time in the bathroom after the water has been used. Volatile DBPs can build up in the air in your home, especially in an enclosed area. And the longer you remain in the area, the more likely you will be exposed.

**Flush out your private well system after disinfection**
Be sure to properly flush out your private well system after adding chlorine to your well for disinfection purposes. Chlorine can be quickly eliminated from your well by flushing out the system afterwards.
FOR MORE INFORMATION...

♦ Local Health Department
Local telephone directory
Local water issues, private well testing guidance, and health
effects of DBPs in drinking water

♦ New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
Consumer and Environmental Health Services
PO Box 369
Trenton, NJ 08625-0369
(609) 588-3120
Health effects of DBPs in drinking water

(609) 588-3123
Bottled water regulations

♦ New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
Bureau of Safe Drinking Water
(609) 292-5550
Federal and State drinking water regulations and public water
supply monitoring results

Office of Quality Assurance
(609) 292-3950
NJ certified laboratories for DBPs in drinking water

♦ United States Environmental Protection Agency
Safe Drinking Water Hotline
(800) 426-4791
Federal drinking water regulations, health effects of DBPs in
drinking water, and other water safety issues

♦ Public Water Utility
Local telephone directory
Public drinking water regulations and monitoring results

♦ NSF International
(313) 769-8010
(800) NSF-6275
Home water treatment device and bottled water information

Visit our website at:
www.state.nj.us/health
OTHER AVAILABLE MATERIALS...

☐ FACTS: Cryptosporidium in Drinking Water
☐ FACTS: Lead in Drinking Water
☐ FACTS: Mercury in Drinking Water
☐ FACTS: Microorganisms in Drinking Water
☐ FACTS: Nitrate and Nitrite in Drinking Water
☐ FACTS: Pesticides in Drinking Water
☐ FACTS: Volatile Organic Compounds in Drinking Water
☐ Contacts and Information: Drinking Water Issues
☐ Parasites and New Jersey Drinking Water: Information on Giardia and Cryptosporidium
☐ Private Well Testing
☐ Don’t Drink Lead (11” x 17” poster)
☐ Keep Your Baby Safe From Lead (11” x 17” poster)

Name__________________________________________
Address_________________________________________
Town____________________State___Zip___________

Please send this order form to:

New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services
Consumer and Environmental Health Services
PO Box 369
Trenton, NJ 08625-0369

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