



Boil Water Notices

Frequently Asked Questions for Food Service Establishments

Houston Public Works will issue a Boil Water Notice as a precaution to protect customers even if there is a very unlikely possibility of drinking water contamination. State laws require that a Boil Water Notice is issued if a water system has (or could have) become contaminated from a water-line break or loss of system pressure.

General

WHY IS THE BOIL WATER NOTICE IMPORTANT?

Contaminated water may contain harmful bacteria, viruses, and parasites which can cause symptoms such as diarrhea, cramps, nausea, headaches, or other symptoms. They may pose a special health risk for infants, young children, the elderly, and people with severely compromised immune systems.

WHAT DOES A BOIL WATER NOTICE MEAN?

According to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's guidelines for a Boil Water Notice, all tap water used for drinking, preparing food, beverages, ice cubes, and washing fruits and vegetables should be brought to a rolling boil for at least one minute on a stovetop, in an electric kettle, or in a microwave oven (in a microwave-safe container) or for three to five minutes for large quantities of water.

WHAT FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS ARE AFFECTED?

All food establishments including bars, restaurants, supermarkets, hotels, caterers, cafeterias in schools, child care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, charitable food facilities, kitchens in non-profit institutions, food manufacturers and distributors, and anyone else involved in the commercial preparation and distribution of food, water, and beverages are affected by a Boil Water Notice.

WHAT ARE THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FOOD ESTABLISHMENT MANAGER DURING A BOIL WATER NOTICE?

- Conduct both the initial and ongoing assessments to ensure consistent compliance with food safety requirements.
- Assess the food, water, and ice present in the facility for potential contamination on the start date of the Boil Water Notice.
- Implement the appropriate emergency procedures outlined below.

OR

- Keep the establishment closed until the Boil Water Notice is lifted and disinfecting of the contaminated items occurs.
- Immediately discontinue operations if a safe operation cannot be maintained using alternative procedures.

WHAT IF THE ESTABLISHMENT HAS AN BCHS -ACCEPTED PLAN FOR A BOIL WATER NOTICE?

Establishments with an emergency preparedness plan accepted by the Houston Health Department Bureau of Consumer Health Services (BCHS) should follow their plan for operating during an Extended Water Outage/ Boil Water Notice.

WHAT CAN FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS DO DURING A CURRENT BOIL WATER NOTICE?

There are temporary emergency alternative sources or procedures that provide safe water that can be used or taken to address specific affected food operations during a Boil Water Notice.

WHAT ARE THE APPROVED ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER?

- Commercially bottled drinking water
- Water hauled from a commercial drinking-water refill station or other approved public water supply (not affected by a Boil Water Notice) using covered, food-grade containers
- Water brought to a rolling boil for at least two minutes and then cooled. Large volumes of water should be brought to a rolling boil for at least three to five minutes.
- Other arrangement approved by Houston Public Works (832) 394-8810/8820

HOW LONG WILL THE NEED TO BOIL WATER OR USE AN APPROVED ALTERNATIVE SOURCE CONTINUE?

Food establishments should not stop boiling the water or using an approved alternative source until they receive notice from Houston Public Works. Typically, the Boil Water Notice lasts for 24 to 48 hours but can be longer depending upon the conditions that caused the need to boil, how quickly the conditions are corrected, and how long it takes for laboratory results to confirm it is safe to return to normal water use. Houston Public Works will provide updates on the progress of corrective actions and how long the event is expected to last.

WHAT DO FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS NEED TO DO WHEN THE NOTICE HAS BEEN LIFTED?

Houston Public Works will make announcements when the public water supply is determined to be safe. Follow all Houston Health Department Bureau of Consumer Health Services (BCHS) requirements for flushing lines ([When the Boil Water Notice Is Lifted](#)) and thoroughly cleaning and sanitizing all water-use equipment prior to resuming normal operations.

What if the Facility has:

A REVERSE OSMOSIS TREATMENT UNIT?

A properly operating reverse osmosis (RO) unit can remove pathogens, including viruses, bacteria, and protozoa. Maintenance records and manufacturer's directions must be provided. A RO unit should not be used if there are any doubts about its ability to remove potentially harmful pathogens. Instead, use boiled (and then cooled) water or water from an approved alternative source.

FILTER SYSTEMS ON FAUCETS OR REFRIGERATORS?

Most filtration systems are designed to improve the taste and odor of the water but do not remove bacteria, viruses, or protozoa. Use boiled water or water from an approved unaffected water supply.

EQUIPMENT MADE WITH PIPED-IN WATER (CARBONATED BEVERAGE DISPENSERS, AUTO-FILL COFFEE MAKERS, INSTANT HOT WATER DISPENSER, ETC.)?

Discontinue use of food equipment that automatically fills with water. Remove, clean, or replace any filters that may have been connected to water lines. Do not install clean or new filters until the Boil Water Notice has been lifted and the lines have been flushed.

WATER FOUNTAINS?

Discontinue use of water fountains during a Boil Water Notice.

ICE MACHINES?

Discontinue making ice until the Boil Water Notice is lifted. Discard existing ice after the Boil Water Notice has been lifted then clean and sanitize ice bins. Use commercially manufactured ice from an unaffected water supply.

SPRAY MISTING UNITS?

Spray misting units used to spray produce, seafood, meat cases, etc. cannot be used. Discard any foods exposed to misters after the Boil Water Notice was issued. Discontinue use of misters until the Boil Water Notice is lifted.

How Food Storage and Preparation is Affected

WHAT ABOUT FOOD THAT IS STORED ON ICE?

Discard food including produce that was stored on ice made after the Boil Water Notice was issued.

WHAT ABOUT FOOD PRODUCTS MADE WITH TAP WATER?

Discard any food that may have been prepared with contaminated water after the Boil Water Notice was issued. Prepare ready to eat food using boiled water, commercially bottled water, or safe potable water hauled from an unaffected public water supply system.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES ARE THERE FOR WASHING/SOAKING PRODUCE?

Do not use tap water for washing/soaking produce. Use pre-washed packaged produce and frozen/canned fruits and vegetables. Wash fresh produce with water that has been boiled, commercially bottled water, or safe potable water hauled from another unaffected public water supply system.

CAN TAP WATER BE USED TO THAW FROZEN FOODS?

No. Do not use tap water to thaw frozen foods. Thaw only in the refrigerator or microwave as part of the cooking process. Discard any food that may have been thawed with contaminated water after the Boil Water Notice was issued.

CAN BOILING WATER BE PART OF THE COOKING PROCESS?

Boil the water first to prevent the potential for inadequate heating. Bring the water to a full rolling boil for at least one minute before adding the food item (for example, making pasta).

Handwashing and Cleaning/Sanitizing

CAN TAP WATER BE USED BY EMPLOYEES OF A FOOD ESTABLISHMENT FOR HANDWASHING?

The best practice is to use only boiled or bottled water or water from an approved unaffected water supply for handwashing. If that is not possible and handwashing is done with soap and tap water, employees must thoroughly dry their hands with paper towels and then use a hand sanitizer. As a reminder - food handlers must **NOT** touch any food with bare hands. Instead, they should use disposable tissue papers, gloves, or utensils.

CAN CUSTOMERS USE TAP WATER IN THE RESTROOMS DURING A BOIL WATER NOTICE?

Customers may use tap water for handwashing provided that hand sanitizer is made available at each hand sink.

WHAT ABOUT CLEANING AND SANITIZING UTENSILS AND TABLEWARE?

Use disposable, single-service utensils and tableware or use the existing dishwasher or the 3-compartment sink. Ensure that the sanitization step is being properly conducted (sanitizer concentration/temperature). Heat sanitizing dishwashers may be used only if verification can be made with a dishwashing thermometer that the final rinse temperature is reaching 180°F or above (not to exceed 194°F) during the full rinse cycle.

Summary – Can Tap Water That Has Not Been Boiled Be Used for the Following?

Drinking	No
Ice Cubes	No
Washing Fruit/Vegetables	No
Preparing Food	No
Cooking	No. Boil water first for one minute before adding food.
Making Drinks	No

Laundry	Yes
Washing Hands	Yes, if followed by a hand sanitizer.
Washing Dishes	Yes, if the proper sanitizer concentration is reached for manual or chemical sanitizing dish machines or the final rinse temperature of a heat-sanitizing dish machine reaches at least 180°F.

Who Should Be Contacted with Additional Questions or Concerns?

Please contact the Houston Health Department Bureau of Consumer Health Services at CHS@houstontx.gov or 832-393-5100 or call 311.

4/26/21



HOUSTON HEALTH DEPARTMENT
 8000 North Stadium Drive, Houston TX 77054
 832-393-5100
CHS@houstontx.gov
HOUSTONCONSUMER.ORG

