

BOIL WATER NOTICE

Frequently asked questions for Food Service Establishments

Houston Water will issue a boil water notice, even if there is a very unlikely possibility of drinking water contamination, as a precaution to protect customers. 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.

WHAT FOOD FACILITIES ARE AFFECTED?

All food facilities / establishments including bars, restaurants, supermarkets, hotels, caterers, cafeterias in schools, nursing homes and 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 the boil water advisory issued.

WHAT DOES A BOIL WATER ORDER MEAN?

According to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality's guidelines for a "boil water" order all water used for drinking, preparing food, beverages, ice cubes, washing fruits and vegetables, should be brought to a rolling boil for at least two minutes on a stovetop, in an electric kettle, or in a microwave (in a microwave-safe container).

WHAT SHOULD THE BAR, RESTAURANT, SUPERMARKET OR FOOD SERVICE MANAGER DO?

A food facility manager is responsible for conducting both the initial and ongoing assessments to ensure consistent compliance with food safety requirements.

1. Assess food, water and ice in your facility affected by the advisory start date.
2. Implement the appropriate emergency procedures outlined below or remain closed until disinfection of contaminated items occurs and boil water advisory is lifted.
3. Immediately discontinue operations if a safe operation cannot be maintained using alternative procedures.
4. Follow all Houston Water requirements for flushing lines and thoroughly clean and sanitize all food contact surfaces prior to resuming normal operations if closed.

WHAT SHOULD FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS DO TO ADDRESS A CURRENT BOIL WATER ORDER?

The following are temporary alternative procedures that can be taken to address specific affected food operations during a boil water notice. Where "boiled" water is indicated, the water must remain at a rolling boil for at least two minutes. Large volumes of water should be brought to a rolling boil for at least three to five minutes.

WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF DRINKING WATER?

- Use commercially bottled water
- Arrange to use a licensed potable drinking water tanker truck.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT BEVERAGES MADE WITH PIPED IN WATER – INCLUDING CARBONATED BEVERAGE DISPENSERS, AUTO-FILL COFFEE MAKERS, INSTANT HOT WATER DISPENSER, JUICE, TEA, ETC?

Discontinue use of post-mix carbonated beverage machine, auto-fill coffee makers, instant hot water heaters, etc. using auto-fill. Remove, clean or replace any filters that may have been connected to water lines.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT ICE?

Discard existing ice made after the boil water notice has been lifted and clean and sanitize ice bins. Discontinue making ice until boil water notice is lifted. Use commercially manufactured ice from an unaffected water supply.

WHAT ABOUT FOOD PRODUCTS REQUIRING WATER?

Discard any ready-to-eat food prepared with water prior to the boil water notice. Prepare ready-to-eat food using commercially bottled or boiled water.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES ARE THERE FOR WASHING/SOAKING PRODUCE?

Do not use tap water for washing/soaking produce. Use pre-washed packaged produce. Use 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?

Do not use tap water to thaw frozen foods. Thaw only in the refrigerator, or microwave as part of the cooking process.

CAN TAP WATER BE USED WHEN COOKING FOOD?

Use commercially bottled water. Use water that has been at a rolling boil for at least two minutes. Arrange to use a licensed drinking water tanker truck.

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

The best practice is to use only boiled, bottled or treated water for handwashing. If that is not possible, and handwashing is done with soap and tap water, you must thoroughly dry your hands with paper towels and then use a hand sanitizer.

As a reminder -- food handlers must NOT touch ready to eat foods with bare hands. Instead they should use disposable papers, gloves and utensils.

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

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

WHAT ABOUT CLEANING AND SANITIZING UTENSILS AND TABLEWARE?

Use disposable, single-service utensils and tableware, or use the existing automatic dish machine or the 3-compartment sink. Make certain that the sanitization step is being properly conducted (sanitizer

concentration/temperature). Heat sanitizing dishwashers may be used only if verification can be made via a dishwashing thermometer that the final rinse temperature is reaching 185 F or above for the full rinse cycle.

CAN SPRAY MISTING UNITS BE USED?

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 or any that may have been exposed to contaminated water prior to the advisory. Discontinue use of misters until boil water is lifted.

HOW LONG WILL THE NEED TO BOIL WATER CONTINUE?

Customers should not stop boiling the water until they receive notice from Houston Water.

Typically, the need to boil water lasts for 24 to 48 hours, but can be longer. How long will depend on 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 Water will provide updates on the progress of corrective actions and how long the event is expected to last.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO WHEN THE NOTICE HAS BEEN LIFTED?

Houston Water will notify you when it is no longer necessary to boil the water. You should flush your water system by running all cold water faucets in your home for at least one minute, cleaning automatic ice makers by making and discarding three batches of ice, and running water softeners through a regeneration cycle.

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, some elderly and people with severely compromised immune systems.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT WITH ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

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