
Water from natural resources

Summary

- Be self sufficient - take drinking water with you
 - Drinking untreated water from natural sources, such as bores, rivers and springs (including mineral springs), can lead to illnesses including gastroenteritis
 - Consider all natural water sources as contaminated and treat the water before drinking.
 - Water treatment methods include boiling, disinfection with chlorine, iodine and ultraviolet light, and filtration
 - Don't use natural, untreated water sources as regular drinking water supplies.
-

If you enjoy outdoor activities such as hiking, camping or four-wheel driving, you should take drinking water with you. If you run out of water, or cannot carry enough water with you for your entire trip, you may need to source drinking water from natural water sources. Drinking untreated water such as bore water, river water or spring water (including mineral springs) can lead to illnesses such as gastroenteritis and diarrhoea. Gastrointestinal illnesses can be particularly severe for the very young, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems. The following is some simple advice on how to ensure that if you need to use natural water sources for drinking that you minimise the risk of getting sick.

Avoid the danger zones

When selecting natural waters to use as a drinking water source there are a few common-sense rules you should follow:

- Check how it looks. The appearance of the water is not a guarantee that it is safe to drink, but water that is clear, free of surface scum or debris, and has no odour is more likely to be free of contaminants than cloudy, smelly water that has visible surface scum.
- Choose water that is free flowing rather than water that is stagnant or still.
- Avoid collecting water from sources that are downstream of:
 - camping areas
 - areas where mining has occurred
 - agricultural areas
 - unsewered dwellings and towns.

Treat natural water before you drink it

Water from untreated sources is variable in quality and its safety can never be guaranteed. You should use natural water sources for drinking and food preparation with caution and, where possible, treat the water to make it safe to drink.

The most straightforward treatment method is to boil the water before you drink it. Bring the water to a rolling boil, cool it and then use it for drinking.

Boiling is effective against most microbial contaminants such as bacteria, viruses and protozoa.

If boiling the water is not practical other treatment methods can be used. These include chlorine and iodine tablets, handheld ultraviolet (UV) light units, portable microfilters and purifiers. These treatment options can be purchased from camping and outdoor stores. In all cases, follow the manufacturer's recommended instructions for use.

Boiling or disinfecting the water may not make the water safe if it is contaminated with harmful chemicals, including natural metals such as arsenic or lead. The only way to reduce the health risk associated with harmful elements and chemicals is to limit your consumption to smaller quantities or occasional use only.

Don't use natural, untreated water sources, such as bores, rivers and springs (including mineral springs) as regular drinking water supplies.

Think before you drink, and treat the water if you are unsure.

Where to get help

- Water Unit, Department of Health and Human Services Tel. **1300 761 874**
- Camping and outdoor stores
- Your GP
- An Environmental Health Officer at your local council

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Department of Health and Human Services - RHP&R - Health Protection - Environmental Health Unit

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2020 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.