Unsafe Drinking Water: It's a public health crisis that’s long overdue for action.

Arsenic can harm health for a lifetime. It causes cancer and lowers intelligence.

Yet, tens of thousands of Mainers are ingesting unsafe amounts of arsenic that come from the bedrock where wells are drilled.

In a state where half our population drinks and cooks with well water, one in eight wells is estimated to be unsafe, leaving more than 100,000 children and adults at risk.¹

Maine must end this public health crisis. All families have the right to drinking water that’s safe and affordable.

¹Stanton et al. (2015) MDI Biological Laboratory Arsenic Summit: Approaches to Limiting Human Exposure to Arsenic, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40572-015-0057-9/fulltext.html#CR28. NOTE: Maine wells may also be contaminated with unsafe levels of chemicals of high concern, including uranium, manganese, radon, and fluoride.
“Arsenic is the biggest public-health problem for water in the United States—it’s the most toxic thing we drink.”

– Yan Zheng, geochemist and senior research scientist, Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Columbia University

ARSENIC HARMS HEALTH FOR A LIFETIME

You can’t see, smell, or taste arsenic in drinking water. Without testing, no one can tell if it’s there. Yet most Maine families drinking and cooking with well water have not had their drinking water tested to check levels of arsenic and other contaminants.

Beginning with prenatal exposure, arsenic can harm health for a lifetime.²

Many pregnant women drinking well water have no idea of the health threats they and their children may face.

Arsenic in drinking water causes bladder, skin, and lung cancers. In Maine and other northern New England states, bladder cancer rates are 20 percent higher than in the rest of the nation. A comprehensive National Institutes of Health study reported that those who drank the most well water had almost twice the risk of bladder cancer than those who drank the least.³ The International Agency for Research on Cancer concluded that arsenic causes cancer of the lung, urinary bladder, and skin.⁴

Arsenic in drinking water harms children’s brain development. A 2014 study of Maine school children with elevated levels of arsenic in their water showed a decline of average IQ scores five to six points lower than their peers.⁵ Across the state, that means higher numbers of students are likely to require special education services, and may face lifelong challenges to their success.

Every Maine family has the right to safe and affordable drinking water. The State of Maine enforces the federal health standards of the Safe Drinking Water Act for public water systems, but residents with household wells get no such protection. The costs of installing and maintaining drinking-water treatment systems can exceed a family’s ability to pay. These costs pose an impossible burden for the families of the 20 percent of Maine children living in poverty.

Unsafe Well Water

This map shows the percent of household wells tested in each county that have arsenic levels that exceed the current federal health standard, based on water testing results by the State of Maine lab through 2013.

Percent Above Guideline

- up to 27% of wells
- up to 22%
- up to 16%
- up to 9%

Arsenic Hot Spots

In each of 110 different Maine towns and cities, more than 15 percent of household wells tested exceed the federal health standard for arsenic. A snapshot of the most recent data shows the top ten:

1) Manchester, 59% of wells tested
2) Gorham, 50%
3) Columbia, 50%
4) Monmouth, 50%
5) Eliot, 49%
6) Columbia Falls, 48%
7) Winthrop, 45%
8) Hallowell, 45%
9) Buxton, 43%
10) Blue Hill, 43%

Source: Maine CDC, Public Health Data Portal
https://data.mainepublichealth.gov/tracking/home

Study Links Arsenic in Well Water to Higher Risk of Bladder Cancer in Northern New England


Safe-Drinking-Water Action Guide

Environmental Health Strategy Center

MAINE LEADERS NEED TO TAKE ACTION

To protect Maine children and families, our state needs to:

1) **Expand testing of household wells for arsenic.**
   Maine health officials have seen that when people learn about the health risks linked to arsenic contamination, they become more likely to test their well water.

   **The Maine Legislature should pass a new law to:**
   - Direct outreach and education resources to the Maine Center for Disease Control, to boost the number of Mainers testing their well water.
   - Require that the State recommend a standard water test that includes arsenic, manganese, uranium, radon, and fluoride to ensure safe drinking water from household wells.
   - Make sure families who are renting have access to information about the safety of their water.

2) **Provide financial assistance for water treatment.**
   Many families cannot afford the costly treatment systems needed to combat arsenic in their well water. Making safe water affordable to all must be a priority of elected officials and other Maine leaders. The Maine Legislature should expand funding for the Maine Home Repair Program to provide financial assistance to low-income families for well water treatment.

3) **Develop a statewide action plan for safe drinking water.**
   Getting to the day when everyone has safe drinking water will take different stakeholders, working together, to create strategies for success. With more than 100,000 Maine people facing arsenic contamination of their water, Maine needs a comprehensive plan, timeline, and benchmarks for progress.

Together, we can make sure all Mainers have access to safe and affordable drinking water.
UNSAFE DRINKING WATER IN MAINE HAS MADE HEADLINES FOR TOO LONG. IT’S TIME FOR SOLUTIONS.

We hope you find this guide useful.

Please share it with others--Maine legislators and other officials, media, community leaders, educators, businesses, organizations, and anyone else who is concerned about safe drinking water.

You can request printed copies from our office. The guide is also posted at ourhealthyfuture.org.

You are welcome to call the Strategy Center for information, or to share your story of well-water testing or how your family may be affected by potentially unsafe drinking water.

“It’s our responsibility to protect children’s brains.”

Retired after 30 years as a special education teacher at Leonard Middle School in Old Town, Regina Creeley became well-informed about arsenic exposure associated with reduced IQ among Maine schoolchildren.

“Learning challenges impact families, teachers’ daily responsibilities, discipline situations, and the allocation of resources, including school budgets,” she says.

“Preventing them is the responsibility of all public officials.”

Resources for Action

How do I test my well?
Visit www.wellwater.maine.gov for answers and more information. To find a lab that will provide you with a water test kit, visit www.informe.org/hett. A comprehensive test typically costs $70 to $100. The state lab will waive testing fees for low-income households. For a fee waiver form: 1 (866) 522-4385.

What if my test results show unsafe water?
For information on home water treatment systems, visit www.nsf.org/consumer-resources/what-is-nsf-certification/water-filters-treatment-certification. Financial help for low-income households may be available through the Maine Home Repair Program. Call (207) 626-4602 or visit www.mainehousing.org/programs-services/HomeImprovement/homeimprovementdetail/HomeRepair or contact the community action agency that serves your county.

How can I help ensure safe water for all?
Contact Emily Postman at (207) 699-5791 to volunteer, and sign up for email alerts at www.ourhealthyfuture.org.

Drinking Water of Maine Families Too Often Contaminated by Arsenic

Portland Press Herald, 6.29.2015

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