

# Put Your Well Water to the Test

Most El Paso County residents don't give a second thought to the quality of water coursing through their water faucets. Our city's primary water supply has a longstanding reputation for being clean and consumer-friendly—originating from pristine mountain streams and subject to stringent quality monitoring and control measures. For rural residents extending beyond the municipal waterline, however, alternate water sources sometimes need to be pursued—such as private wells.

Convenient and functional as they are, private wells carry some potential health risks—for example, bacterial contamination. A certain group of bacteria known as coliform commonly dwell in soil, vegetation and surface water, and are the primary “contaminating agents” in private water systems. Although most coliform bacteria are harmless to people, their presence indicates a breach in the water system.

Bacteria known as *E. coli* are part of the fecal coliform group and are far more threatening to humans, as they can cause serious illness if not addressed. *E. coli* usually is found in the intestines of warm-blooded animals and their feces. When *E. coli* bacteria are present, other bacteria, viruses and parasites may be lurking in the water as well. Consequently, it is very important that well owners properly maintain their private water systems—including annual testing for the presence of bacteria. More frequent testing is recommended if there are known problems with well water in your region (e.g., shallow wells, wells located close to other water sources or waste disposal sites) or notable changes in the taste, appearance or odor of your water. Now let's address some other questions you might have about well water:

## **How do germs/bacteria get into well water?**

Germs and other infectious agents can enter well water in a variety of ways, including:

- Natural contaminants in rocks and soil that can leak into ground water.
- Structural problems—such as cracks in well casings, poorly sealed caps or fractures in foundational bedrock.
- Bacteria in soil and other water sources that are carried into well interiors by insects.
- Polluted storm water runoff, agricultural activity, flooded sewers or malfunctioning septic systems.

## **What should I do if I want to test my well water for possible bacteria contamination?**

The El Paso County Department of Health and Environment has a State-certified laboratory equipped to test well water for the presence of total coliform bacteria and *E. coli* bacteria. In fact, the Health Department's lab performs nearly 7,000 water tests each year for residents with new or existing domestic wells, along with smaller community water systems, military bases and private schools in and around El Paso County. People wanting to test their well water for the presence of bacteria can contact the Health Department's laboratory and request a testing kit.

Currently, there are no laws or regulations addressing the quality of private well water. As a private well owner or well-water consumer, you are responsible for making sure your water is safe. The El Paso County Department of Health and Environment's testing policy is to evaluate private water supplies applying the same standards used by the State Health Department to assess public drinking water. **Note: Private well owners, subcontractors and system operators are responsible for obtaining initial water samples from their properties or client properties—including properly drawing, storing and delivering samples to the Health Department lab to ensure accurate test results.**

**What if my well water tests positive for bacterial contamination?**

Most instances of bacterial contamination in well water can be remedied through chlorine treatment. The Health Department provides written and online instructions on appropriate chlorination procedures, along with steps for identifying and correcting sources of contamination.

**Should I test my water for other contaminants?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends additional testing for chemical and metal contaminants, especially for first-time well owners. In addition to testing for coliform bacteria, other recommended tests for El Paso County residents include fluoride, arsenic, copper, iron, lead and uranium. For information on these and other tests, contact the State Laboratory Services Division at 303-692-3090.

For more information on well water testing, visit our Web site at [www.elpasocountyhealth.org](http://www.elpasocountyhealth.org), or call (719) 578-3120.

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