

Frequently Asked Questions About Taste and Odor in Drinking Water



Occasionally, you may notice a difference in the taste, smell or appearance of your drinking water, especially during the summer months. These changes can come from a variety of sources and do not affect the safety of the drinking water. Among the most common causes are home plumbing, the chlorine used to treat water, organic materials in the water, algae growth or a change in the source of water.

Below are answers to some frequently asked questions about the quality of your drinking water.

Is my water safe to drink?

Local water suppliers employ highly trained staff to consistently monitor and test the drinking water for compliance with state and federal drinking water standards. Occasional changes to the taste and odor can come from a variety of sources that do not affect the safety of the drinking water.

Why does my water taste differently sometimes?

Your drinking water taste could be affected by your home plumbing, the chlorine used to treat water, organic materials in the water or a change in the source of water. During the summer heat, organic materials can increase. Some water agencies use a blend of imported and local water supplies and the blend changes during times of drought. Different water supplies have different mineral composition and varying levels of hardness, which will affect taste.

Why does my water smell like rotten egg or sulfur?

A rotten egg or sulfur smell is usually caused by a dirty garbage disposal or organic matter in the drain, such as hair or soap. It can also be caused by a hot water heater not set to the proper temperature or by sewer gases entering the house through a dry p-trap. Cleaning the offending drain, flushing the hot water heater or running water in seldom-used sinks and tubs should eliminate the odor.

Why is my water cloudy?

A cloudy or milky look to water is usually caused by the presence of air bubbles. Air bubbles are harmless and do not affect the taste or odor of the water. To determine if your water has air bubbles, simply fill a glass and set it on the counter. The bubbles should rise to the top and cause the cloudiness to dissipate within a few minutes.

Why does my drinking water smell/taste earthy or musty?

An earthy or musty smell or taste is often caused by algae growth in rivers and open reservoirs, which is most common during summer months. The water treatment process eliminates any harmful effects from these blooms.

Why does my water smell/taste like chlorine?

Chlorine is used to neutralize pathogens like bacteria and parasites during treatment. A low level of chlorine remains to safeguard your water as it travels to your home. Water agencies that use chlorine monitor the levels constantly.

Chlorine taste is less pronounced in cold water, so keep a chilled supply in the refrigerator.

Why is my water occasionally brown or discolored?

Discolored water is usually caused by the presence of rust or sediment from pipes in the water. This can occur when there are disturbances in the water distribution system, such as nearby fire hydrant use, a break in nearby water lines or system maintenance. Try clearing sediment by running the cold water tap nearest to the sidewalk until the water runs clear. If it does not clear in a few minutes, wait an hour and repeat.

How can I improve the taste of my water?

In many cases, chilling the water improves taste. Place a pitcher of tap water in the refrigerator for a ready supply. Adding lemon can also improve the taste.

Where can I learn more about the quality of my water?

Local water suppliers publish information about the quality of the drinking water each year in a document called a Consumer Confidence Report. Call your local water supplier or visit the website to find a copy of the document.