

Safe Water for Travellers

Fact Sheet

In Canada we are used to drinking safe water. In developing countries, water is often not properly treated or not treated at all. There are many ways you can protect yourself against germs in your water or beverages while travelling.

What should travellers know?

- Water boiled for one minute, at any altitude, is safe to drink.
- You can safely drink beer and wine; however, alcohol added to beverages does **not** make them safe.
- The best defense against germs is frequent hand washing; wash your hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers (at least 60% alcohol) before eating or preparing food, and after handling money or using the bathroom.

Travellers should NOT

- drink tap water.
- rinse toothbrushes in tap water.
- use ice, unless it is made from boiled, bottled or purified water (freezing does not kill the organisms that cause diarrhea).
- drink from wet cans or bottles as the water on them may be contaminated. Dry wet cans and bottles before opening and clean all surfaces that will have contact with your mouth.
- drink fruit juice unless it comes directly from a sealed container; otherwise, it may have been diluted with tap water.

What should travellers do?

- Drink—and brush your teeth with—sealed, bottled water that has been distilled or sterilized with ozone or by boiling; or use chemically treated, filtered or boiled water.
- Drink beverages, such as hot tea and coffee, made only with safe water, whenever possible.
- Drink canned, boxed or commercially bottled carbonated water and drinks. International brands are safest. Beware of unsealed containers that may have been re-filled.
- Drink coconut juice directly from the shell.
- Purify your own water if necessary (see methods page 2). Decide which method to use for water purification and bring along the appropriate equipment.
- Carry safe water with you if you are going out for the day and where availability of safe water is not assured.
- Continue to breast feed infants who are still nursing. If formula is used, it must be prepared with boiled water and sterilized containers.

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Water can be made safer by using either heat or chemicals to kill the harmful organisms.

Boiling

- Boiling is the best water treatment method. Use this clean water for brushing teeth and drinking.
- Water should be brought to a rigorous rolling boil for one minute. Allow water to cool to room temperature in a clean, covered container. Urban travellers may choose an immersion coil for boiling water (a plug adapter and current converter might be necessary).

Purification with chemicals

- Pristine (available from camping stores) is chlorine dioxide, so it contains no iodine and leaves no aftertaste. When used correctly, chlorine dioxide is proven effective against bacteria, viruses and protozoa, including giardia and cryptosporidium. See www.pristine.ca
- Most diarrhea germs can be killed by iodine, which can be used to disinfect water, leafy vegetables and fruits. Add 5 drops of 2% iodine to 1 litre of water, and let stand for 30 minutes. Travellers who have thyroid problems or iodine allergies, or who are pregnant, should **not** use iodine for water purification.
- For those travellers who wish to avoid the taste and smell of iodine in their disinfected water, vitamin C (ascorbic acid) can be added to the water after the iodine has been in contact with the water for 30 minutes or more. Add about 50 mg of vitamin C to a litre of water and shake briefly to eliminate the taste and odour of iodine.
- Tetraglycine hydroperiodide tablets (e.g. Globaline, Potable-Aqua, Coghlan's) are available from pharmacies and sporting goods stores. The manufacturer's instructions should be followed.
- Filters will take out floating particles in the water, but will **not** remove harmful microorganisms. Filtration improves the disinfection of iodine and chlorine. Many different filter systems are available at camping stores.

You can become ill from swimming in unsafe water:

- Ask local residents for advice before swimming in lakes, rivers or seas.
- When you have been advised that schistosomiasis, a parasitic larvae, is present (ask your Travel Clinic) avoid fresh water exposure, but otherwise, stay away from the shoreline and slow moving waters of rivers, ponds and lakes, where you could develop "swimmer's itch." Towel off vigorously to help prevent penetration of the parasitic larvae. Salt or brackish waters are safe.
- Check for factory drainage and sewage outlets, which may expose you to serious diseases such as cholera or hepatitis A.
- Swimming pools are usually safe if the water is chlorinated and the filters are maintained.

Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Immunization Program at 613-966-5500
Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | www.hpepublichealth.ca

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