



Private Drinking Water Wells Fact Sheet Florida Department of Health, Bureau of Environmental Health

This fact sheet discusses possible health risks from coliform bacteria sometimes found in drinking water wells.

Coliform Bacteria

What are coliform bacteria?

Bacteria are a type of life form we can only see with a microscope. Also known as microbes, they occur throughout the environment. Coliform bacteria are a large group of related types of them. Most are harmless to humans, but some, such as *E. coli*, relate to the gut tracts of warm-blooded animals. They can cause disease with symptoms like severe diarrhea.

If most coliform bacteria are harmless, why do we test for them?

Just because a test finds coliform bacteria in your well water, it does not mean that drinking it is going to make you sick. It *does* show that there is a way for bacteria to get into your well water. When found, it shows that the types of bacteria that cause disease (or pathogens) can also get into your well.

Coliform bacteria serve as stand-ins (or *indicator organisms*) to see if pathogens may also exist in sampled water. It is not practical to test for all possible bacteria that might cause disease. Coliforms are easy to grow, and it does not cost a lot of money to test for them. The reason to test for them is that if no coliforms show up in the water, the chances of pathogens being there are very low.

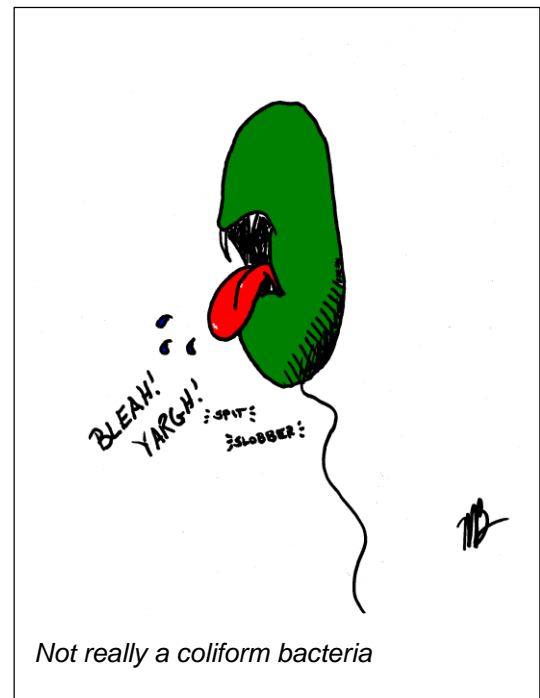
What should I do if my water contains coliform bacteria?

It is easy for just one bacteria to contaminate a water sample by mistake. Before you make any costly changes to your well or plumbing, you should take a second (or confirmation) sample. This will show whether bacteria are really in the well or if there was a sampling or lab error.

If you have a water treatment system, such as an aerator or water softener, you may want to take two confirmation samples. One should be before the treatment. The other should be after it. This will show if the problem exists in the well itself or in the plumbing.

While you are waiting on the confirmation sample results, you should use properly treated water for drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth; especially if fecal coliform or *E. coli* are also present. Bring water to a rolling boil for one minute or buy commercially bottled water.

If a second set of samples still show coliform bacteria, you should disinfect your plumbing and/or your well. You can download a brochure on well disinfection here: www.floridahealth.gov/environmental-health/private-well-testing/_documents/well-water-facts-disinfection.pdf



Once you have disinfected your well and plumbing, test your well water again. Until your tests come back with no coliforms, you should continue to boil your water.

How can coliform bacteria affect my health?

As stated above, some types of coliform bacteria can cause disease. The most common symptoms are an upset stomach, diarrhea, and/or flu-like symptoms. Most healthy adults will have mild symptoms. However, people with weak immune systems, the very young, or the very old may have severe to possibly fatal illness.

For additional health information, please call the Department of Health in Lee County, at 239-274-2200 or visit us online at:
<http://lee.floridahealth.gov/programs-and-services/environmental-health/index.html>