

Public health advice when water supply is low

Updated: 31 December 2010. 3.00pm.

The Public Health Agency has issued the following advice to the public in relation to keeping healthy when mains water is unavailable.

How do I keep my hands clean without mains water?

It is still very important to ensure that your hands are clean before cooking food and eating as many gastrointestinal illnesses are transmitted through dirty hands. The very young and the elderly are especially vulnerable. For this reason people should:

- use any water you have for hand hygiene first before you use it for showering and bathing;
- use antibacterial hand gels or wipes if you have them;
- be extra vigilant in supervising small children to keep their hands clean.

Can I drink the water I get from the bowser at the distribution points?

Bottled water should be used in preference for drinking when your water is in short supply. The water in the bowser or tanker is drinkable but the container that you use to collect the water from the bowser, while looking clean, may contain bacteria. Therefore the following steps should be taken:

- ensure you use a clean container to collect the water and preferably one that can be covered or has a cap or top;
- it is advised that you boil the water and cool it before using it for drinking, brushing teeth and making ice;
- bowser water can be used for making tea or coffee, provided you boil it;
- bowser water can be used for cooking.

Can I brush my teeth with water from a bowser?

The water you use to brush your teeth should be of the same quality as the water you drink. Preferably use bottled water or water that has been boiled and allowed to cool.

My baby is on formula feed so how do I feed my baby?

- use boiled water and make up feed in the usual way;
- ready-made preparations are available and can be used as an alternative;
- it should be noted that some types of bottled water may not be suitable for making up infant formula because of high salt levels (sodium concentrations of less than 20mg/l are preferable and not more than 200mg/l). There may be labelling on the bottle that will indicate if it is not suitable for making up infant formula.

How do I maintain personal hygiene when water is in short supply?

A small amount of water can be used to fill a bathroom sink and sponges or facecloths used for personal washing with soap. Separate cloths/sponges should be used for the face and genital areas. Each person in the household should have their own designated cloth/sponge and towel. Alternatives to this include using sanitary wipes or alcohol-based gels. You should note that alcohol-based gels cannot be used on the face or genital areas.

How do I maintain a clean environment at home without mains water?

The most important places to keep clean are the surfaces where food is prepared or eaten, the toilet and wash hand basins in bathrooms. Surfaces and sinks can be cleaned with disinfectant wipes or if a small amount of water is available use a clean cloth and the usual cleaning solutions. Toilet cleaner and domestic bleach can be used to clean toilets.

How do I flush my toilet without mains water?

Flushing a toilet uses three to seven litres of water so it is important that unnecessary flushing does not take place.

- toilets do not require sterile water for flushing;
- water from distribution points can be used if you have enough to drink;
- waste water can be used to flush the toilet such as dish water. You can fill the cistern with that water or pour it down the toilet until the toilet is cleared;
- rain water can be collected in buckets and used for this purpose.

How do I keep my house warm without mains water?

Most houses have central heating systems that are based on radiators filled with water that are heated by an oil or gas boiler. There is a chance that these systems will be affected by the shortage of mains water supplies. It is important if your heating is not working to take the following steps:

- consult a plumber to assess the cause of the non-functioning boiler;
- if using an alternative heating appliance ensure it has been adequately maintained and the manufacturer's instructions followed.

How can hygiene be maintained in schools?

Hand washing is one of the most important ways of controlling the spread of diseases, particularly in environments such as schools. The recommended method for washing hands is to use liquid soap, water and paper towels. Hands should be washed after using the toilet and before eating or handling food.

If flowing hot and cold water is not available for a prolonged period of time it will not be possible to maintain adequate hand hygiene. Sanitising wipes and hand gels, although useful at sterilising, are not an alternative to adequate hand washing.

Children/students with diarrhoea and vomiting should not attend school or should be sent home immediately if these symptoms are identified. A school should not open in the absence of hot and cold running water.

To prevent scalding

Care should be taken when boiling water and pouring it into containers to cool as there is a risk of scalding. The boiled water should be poured into a clean container that can be covered and allowed to cool. This should be kept away from children.

The important message is to keep warm by:

- wearing several thin layers of clothing as they will keep you warmer than one thick layer – wear a hat, gloves and scarf if necessary;
- when inside, keep moving and try not to sit still for more than one hour at a time as activity generates body heat;
- have frequent warm healthy meals and drinks – but avoid alcoholic drinks as these can lower body temperature.

Vulnerable and elderly neighbours

Finally, the PHA advises that people should check on their vulnerable and elderly neighbours who may not be able to get water from distribution points and make sure they have everything they need to keep warm, watered and fed.

Advice for food handlers and operators

An adequate supply of drinkable water is essential to operate a safe food business, particularly if you are preparing or handling open high risk foods.

During the current water shortages, which may last for up to one week, all food businesses must maintain good standards of hygiene, restrict their operations, or where necessary, even close.

Any food business operator who is unsure or requires specific advice should contact the Food Safety Team on 028 9027 0428.

See Belfast City Council's website for further information at www.belfastcity.gov.uk/bigfreeze/water.asp (Scroll to the bottom of the website for the appropriate information.)