



Public Water Systems and the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Frequently Asked Questions

Updated May 2020

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Guidance for Water Systems During the COVID-19 Response

Can COVID-19 be transmitted in drinking water?

- The virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) has not been detected in drinking water.
- Water suppliers who use surface water sources typically filter and disinfect the water to make sure the water is safe to drink. Public water systems that use groundwater sources that are untreated are also considered safe as long as they continue to meet all standards and regulatory requirements to protect against contamination.
- Most of the time, people with COVID-19 spread it to other people when small droplets from a sneeze or cough are inhaled or land on a nearby person's face, usually within 6 feet. Rarely, people might catch COVID-19 by touching a surface that a person with the infection coughed or sneezed on then touching their own mouth, nose or eyes.
- The virus that causes COVID-19 has been detected in the fecal matter of infected people and in sewage systems. The virus might be spread by contact with stool or sewage. However, all public water systems are required to routinely sample for coliform bacteria to ensure there is no contamination from sources of fecal matter or sewage.

What extra precautions can water suppliers take during the COVID-19 emergency?

- Identify critical functions, staff, backups and remote work procedures and include them in all water supplier required emergency response plans.
- Verify that the supply of parts, equipment, and water treatment chemicals is uninterrupted.

- As needed, prioritize actions and work based on public health considerations. For example, ensure continuity of treatment operations including daily checks of filtration operation, turbidity, disinfection CT (concentration of disinfectant x contact time) and chlorine residual, critical maintenance, and collection of samples for acute contaminants like bacteria and nitrate.
- Establish procedures to ensure physical distancing. Encourage good hygiene practices among staff.

What if my water system's operators are not able to fulfill operational duties and need assistance during this public health emergency?

- Operators should prioritize ensuring that critical treatment is operating properly, such as coagulation, filtration and disinfection. If operators are not able to verify adequate treatment, discuss the potential need for a public notice with your regulator.
- All public water systems should consider signing the Mutual Aid Agreement, as well as the Shared Worker Agreement addendum, through the Oregon Water / Wastewater Agency Response Network (ORWARN). Other ORWARN members may be able to assist other water suppliers whose capabilities are overwhelmed, if these agreements are in place. There are no fees. These agreements can be found at <https://orwarn.org>.
- Oregon Association of Water Utilities (<https://oawu.net/>) may also be able to assist.
- The drinking water program Circuit Rider may provide short-term limited assistance (<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/HEALTHYENVIRONMENTS/DRINKINGWATER/OPERATIONS/Pages/circuitrider.aspx>).
- If other resources are not available and a water system operator finds they may be unable to continue to supply safe water, they should contact their county emergency manager so the issue can be forwarded to the State Emergency Operations Center, as appropriate.

Should my water system add a disinfectant to help combat COVID-19?

Many water systems already continuously add a disinfectant such as chlorine to drinking water. Adding a disinfectant specifically due to COVID-19 concerns is not warranted. For any system considering permanently adding a disinfectant for any reason, OHA Drinking Water Services (DWS) must approve plans and equipment in advance.

Will DWS issue a violation to my water system if operators are ill and unable to collect samples or my lab is closed or lacks the capacity to analyze my samples?

In general, DWS will continue to apply the monitoring and reporting requirements as specified in the rules. However, in cases when water systems are unable to collect or report samples due to operator illness or capacity issues associated with the lab, please notify DWS at compliance.dw@dhsosha.state.or.us. DWS will evaluate the situation and determine whether to issue violations. DWS prioritizes the public's health in responding to water quality issues.

What if a water supplier is unable to collect samples in people’s homes (e.g., for bacteria, lead, and copper) due to COVID-19 concerns?

During an emergency, we still expect water suppliers to take samples for bacteria, lead, and copper from representative locations within the distribution system. Samples may have to be collected from locations outside the home or alternative locations to avoid entering homes. Failure to sample the distribution system could create a health risk to the public.

If the laboratory that I use for my water sample analyses has limited services or is closed, what is the best way to find alternate laboratories?

We have a GIS interactive map on our website with locations and contact information of all labs accredited by ORELAP. Please call the labs first for confirmation before sending them your samples. Here is the link to the map as well as other lab resources:

<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/HEALTHYENVIRONMENTS/DRINKINGWATER/MONITORING/Pages/labs.aspx>

Submitting Lab Data and Contacting Drinking Water Services

What is the best way to submit lab data or reports or contact DWS?

To submit lab data and operating reports:

- By email (preferred): send a PDF file of results to dwp.dmce@dhsoha.state.or.us
- By postal mail:
Drinking Water Services
PO Box 14350
Portland, OR 97293-0350
- By fax: 971-673-0694

Note that there may be some delays with entering of data received via postal mail or fax.

Labs: See above. For water quality results over a maximum contaminant level, send to dwp.dmce@dhsoha.state.or.us with subject line starting with “Attention.”

Water system operators:

Contact DWS the way you normally would. If working from home, staff will have access to their voicemail, and email. If uncertain, call us at 971-673-0405. We will prioritize immediate public health concerns and return calls as soon as we are able.

General Public: Call us at 971-673-0405. We will prioritize immediate public health concerns and return calls as we are able.

Operator Certification Training and CEUs

Where can water system operators obtain continuing education during the COVID-19 restrictions?

While many in-person training events have been cancelled or postponed, there are many online trainings available. DWS maintains a webpage that identifies available training vendors and classes. We are developing additional free training resources as quickly as we can. Online training classes from reputable vendors (e.g., AWWA, EPA, Sacramento State) that address water system Technical, Managerial & Financial capacity are also acceptable. Please visit the Training Opportunities page for a listing of free online training classes, located at healthoregon.org/dwtraining. Please direct your certification questions to either DWS.OpCert@dhsosha.state.or.us or Cross.Connection@dhsosha.state.or.us.

I am a certified operator and have been selected for a CEU audit but am unable to access my training records. What should I do?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the deadline for CEU documentation for operators selected for audit has been extended to July 15, 2020.

I need to submit my small system operator renewal forms but am unable to access the required training. What should I do?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Small Water System Operator training courses have been canceled through May 2020. As a result, OHA has extended the renewal cycle for small water system operators through October 31, 2020.

Guidance on Reopening Buildings and Water Systems

When the stay-at-home order is lifted, what precautions should be taken before reopening buildings?

To reduce the risk of *Legionella* and other water quality problems common in building plumbing, you can communicate proper recommissioning measures to your customers whose buildings may be reopening after an extended closure or reduced use. Water that has been sitting stagnant in the piping and any storage tanks should be thoroughly flushed out of the system. If your water system adds chlorine, suggest the building owner check to see that typical chlorine levels are present throughout the building after flushing. They should consider collecting one or more coliform bacteria samples to check the water quality before reopening. Refer them to OHA Guidance for “Reopening Building Water Systems after Prolonged Shutdown” on the OHA COVID-19 webpage, <https://sharedsystems.dhsosha.state.or.us/DHSForms/Served/le2322r.pdf>.

My water system has been closed, but I plan to reopen after the emergency is over. What procedures should I follow?

Water that has been sitting stagnant in the piping and any storage tanks should be thoroughly flushed out of the system. If your system adds chlorine, check to see that your regular chlorine levels are present throughout the system. One or more “special” coliform bacteria samples should be collected to check the water quality before reopening. If the water system was depressurized, refer to the startup procedure online here:

<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/HealthyEnvironments/DrinkingWater/Operations/Pages/startup.aspx>

Additional Information Resources

Where can I find additional information?

- Oregon Health Authority: www.healthoregon.org/coronavirus
- US Environmental Protection Agency: <https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/coronavirus-and-drinking-water-and-wastewater>
- Center for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/water.html>
- World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/water-sanitation-hygiene-and-waste-management-for-covid-19>