Test Your Water for Coliform Bacteria

Tacoma - Pierce County Health Department
Healthy People in Healthy Communities

Information for Public Water System Managers

Environmental Health Division
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Simple Steps for Collecting Bacteria Test Samples

Coliform bacteria is a general term used to describe a group of bacteria. Certain types of coliform bacteria, such as *E. coli*, are capable of causing illness in humans.

The Health Department recommends you test for coliform bacteria at least once a year. It is an easy process, and is one of the most important things you can do to protect yourself and your water system users from potential waterborne illnesses. All you need to do is follow the steps outlined below:

Step 1: Contact a Certified Water Laboratory

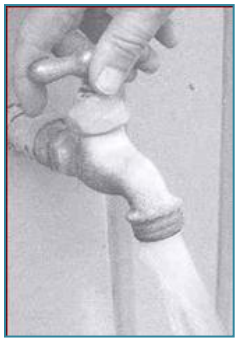
Certified water laboratories will be able to process your water samples for a small fee, but you will need to collect a sample yourself. Once you contact a lab, they should be able to provide you with a do-it-yourself kit consisting of a sterilized bottle, a lab form, and a rubber band. A list of some of the certified labs in Pierce County can be found at www.tpchd.org/certifiedlabs.

Step 2: Choose a Sample Tap

You will want to choose a tap that best represents the water in your distribution system. Avoid easily-contaminated sample sites such as swivel faucets, hot and cold mixing faucets (with a single lever), leaky or spraying faucets, drinking fountains, janitorial sinks, frost-free hose bibs, and faucets below or near ground level.

Step 3: Prepare the Sample Tap

You will want to remove any attachments from the faucet, including aerators, screens, washers, hoses and water filters. The Health Department recommends disinfecting the faucet by spraying it with a chlorine water solution. This solution should be roughly 50% household bleach and 50% water.



Step 4: Flush the Sample Tap

Turn on the cold water only and let it run in a steady stream for at least five minutes. Before collecting the sample, turn the water down to a thin stream (about the width of a pencil), then let the water run one minute.

Step 5: Prepare the Sample Bottle

To avoid contamination while taking the sample, hold the bottle near the bottom with one hand, hold the top of the cap with the other, and then unscrew the cap. **Do not** set the cap face down, touch any part of the cap that touches the bottle, or let anything touch the rim or inside of the cap.

NOTE: There may be some liquid or powder in the sample bottle to neutralize any residual chlorine that may be present. **Don't** rinse it out.

Step 6: Collect the Water Sample

Hold the bottle under the stream of water, being careful not to let the bottle touch the sample tap. Fill the bottle to the neck or indicated fill line, but do not allow it to overflow. Remove the bottle from the water flow and carefully replace the cap.

Step 7: Complete the Lab Slip

Complete the lab slip. If there was anything unusual about the sample collection, note it on the lab slip. Laboratory forms vary, but the following information is very important to complete:

- Date and time the sample was taken
- System type (i.e., Group A or Group B)
- Water System ID number
- Water System name
- Sample location (specific enough that sample can be repeated, if needed)
- Type of test to be conducted
- If treated, check type of treatment

Step 8: Label and Deliver Sample

Secure the lab slip to the bottle using a rubber band. Deliver the sample to a certified lab or to a designated drop-off location for the lab as soon as possible. Lab analysis must begin within 30 hours of sample collection and it will take two to five days to receive your results.

If you have additional questions or want more information about your responsibilities as a public water system manager, please contact Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department's Drinking Water Program at (253) 798-6470, option 2, or email us at EHDrinkingWater@tpchd.org