



FACT SHEET

Nitrate in Drinking Water

What is nitrate?

Nitrate is a chemical found in most fertilizers, in manure, and in the liquid waste discharged from septic tanks. Natural bacteria in soil can convert nitrogen into nitrate.

How can nitrate get into my well water?

Although nitrate occurs naturally in drinking water, elevated levels in groundwater usually result from human activities such as overuse of chemical fertilizers and improper disposal of human and animal wastes. These fertilizers and wastes are sources of nitrogen containing compounds which are converted to nitrates in the soil. Nitrates are extremely soluble in water and can move easily through soil into the drinking water supply.

Why is nitrate in drinking water a problem?

Nitrate can affect red blood cells and reduce their ability to carry oxygen in the body. In most adults and children these affected blood cells rapidly return back to normal. However the blood cells of infants can take much longer to return to normal. As a result, infants who are given water with high levels of nitrate (or foods made with nitrate contaminated water) may develop a serious health condition due to the lack of oxygen. This condition is called methemoglobinemia or "blue baby syndrome." Some scientists think that diarrhea can make this problem even worse.

What are the signs of "blue baby syndrome"?

An infant with moderate to serious "blue baby syndrome" may have a brownish-blue color due to the lack of oxygen. This condition may be hard to detect in infants with dark skin. In mild to moderate cases babies may have the same symptoms as when they have a cold or another infection (fussy, tired, diarrhea, or vomiting). While there is a simple blood test to see if an infant has "blue baby syndrome," doctors may not think to do this test for babies with mild to moderate symptoms.

If your baby has a brownish-blue color, take your baby to a hospital immediately. There is a medication (methylene blue) that will quickly return your baby's blood to normal.

How can I prevent "blue baby syndrome"?

The best way to prevent "blue baby syndrome" is to avoid giving your baby water that may be contaminated with nitrate. Infants under one year of age should not drink water exceeding the drinking water standard of 10 parts per million (ppm) of nitrate. Boiling water will kill bacteria that are in well water, but it will not reduce the level of nitrate.

Nitrate in water will not have a long-lasting effect on your baby. If your baby does not have any of the symptoms of “blue baby syndrome” you do not need to take your baby to the doctor.

Although nitrate has been found in breast milk, there are no confirmed reports of “blue baby syndrome” being caused by a nursing mother who consumed well water that contained nitrate.

Can nitrate affect adults?

Most older children and adults will not be affected because their red blood cells will be quickly converted back to normal. Some people have conditions that make them susceptible to having health problems from nitrate. These include:

- Individuals who don't have enough stomach acids.
- Individuals with an inherited lack of the enzyme that converts affected red blood cells back to normal (methemoglobin reductase).
- Women who are pregnant or who are trying to become pregnant

How is nitrate in drinking water regulated?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has established a federal drinking water standard, called a Maximum Contaminant Level of 10 milligrams per liter (mg/L), or 10 parts per million (ppm) for nitrate. Public water system operators are required to sample for various contaminants, including nitrate. There is no required sampling of private individual wells, however, private well owners are encouraged to test their well for nitrate on a regular basis.

How can I tell if my well water has nitrate?

Shallow wells, poorly sealed or constructed wells, and wells that draw from shallow aquifers are at the highest risk of having nitrate-contaminated water. The only way to know if your private well is contaminated with nitrate is to have it tested.

The Dickinson-Iron District Health Department can give you information about where you can get your water tested. Nitrate tests usually cost \$14. Sample bottles can be obtained at the Health Department. Nitrate levels can change over time so you should test your well yearly.

Public water systems are tested routinely. Public water systems cannot have more than 10 parts per million (or milligrams per liter) of nitrate. Systems with elevated nitrate levels are required to notify their customers.

Need More Information?

Contact the Dickinson-Iron District Health Department at one of the following locations:

818 Pyle Drive
Kingsford, MI 49802
(906) 774 1868

601 Washington Avenue
Iron River, MI 49935
(906) 265 9913