



Private Well Water Testing

Frequently Asked Questions

[How do I test my well?](#)

The Marathon County Health Department Lab provides the paperwork and collection bottles according to the tests you want performed. Instructions for collecting the water properly are on the back of the provided form. Water samples need to be dropped off at the laboratory within 24 hours of collection. Tests are ordered and paid for when samples are dropped off.

[What should I test for?](#)

Bacteria and nitrate are the most common contaminants in private wells and should be tested for annually. Both bacteria and nitrate have naturally occurring sources and cannot be seen, smelled or tasted. Elevated levels indicate that your well is not properly protected and drinking the well water may impact you or your family's health. Testing should also be performed if the well has been repaired, modified or if you notice changes in appearance, taste or odor. Bacteriological test results will be reported as safe or unsafe; Coliform bacteria present or absent, E. coli present or absent.

[How long will it take to get my results?](#)

Allow 3-10 days to receive results depending on what day and time the water sample is dropped off, which tests are ordered and how you choose to receive your results. A laboratory technician can give a more accurate estimate when the samples are brought in.

[What are Coliform bacteria?](#)

Coliform bacteria are microorganisms that can be found in human and animal waste, in soil, on vegetation and in surface water runoff. Their presence in well water indicates that other bacteria, viruses and parasites that can cause sickness may also be present.

[What can be done if my water isn't bacteriologically safe to drink?](#)

When you receive a bacteriologically unsafe result, we will provide you with the DNR-approved method of disinfecting your well or suggest you contact a professional.

[What is nitrate?](#)

Nitrate is one of the most common groundwater contaminants. Most people consume 10-25 mg of nitrate per day in leafy vegetables and cured meats. Additional exposure from contaminated drinking water may pose a significant health risk. Common sources of nitrate contamination include nitrogen fertilizers, manure, septic systems, municipal sewage treatment systems, and decaying plant debris. Nitrate-contaminated water should never be given to infants under 6 months of age since it can reduce the blood's ability to carry oxygen. In severe cases it can cause a condition methemoglobinemia, or "blue baby syndrome." This condition can lead to coma and death if not treated promptly. People of all ages should avoid long-term consumption of nitrate-contaminated water as some studies have suggested an increased risk of thyroid disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer.

[What can be done if the nitrate level is too high?](#)

If the results are above 10 mg/L, a pamphlet from the Department of Natural Resources will be provided. This will include information about health risks and contacts for installation of a water treatment system. Nitrate removal systems will also remove fluoride so you may need to consult with your child's pediatrician and your dentist to determine the best care options for dental health.

[What is Fluoride and should I test for Fluoride in a private well?](#)

Fluoride is a substance that's found naturally in rocks and soil. Water passes through the soil and absorbs the fluoride. As a result, most water contains some amount of fluoride. Fluoride levels vary in different areas of Marathon County and can change based on seasonal changes and agricultural use. We recommend testing the fluoride level every 3-5 years.

[What can be done if the Fluoride level is too high?](#)

At low concentrations (0.7-1.2 mg/L) fluoride can help prevent tooth decay. If the fluoride level is higher than 2.0 mg/L, you are advised to find a different source of drinking water for children under 12 yrs. as it can negatively affect tooth enamel. People of all ages should avoid drinking water with fluoride levels at or above 4.0 mg/L as it increases the risk of skeletal fluorosis; a serious bone disorder. There are water treatment systems available that remove fluoride. Consult with a contractor to review options available.

[What tests are in a Softener package?](#)

If you have questions regarding the water quality, taste or smell, or staining issues we recommend ordering the softener package. The package includes the following tests: Iron, Hardness, pH and Total Alkalinity. These tests will help determine if your current softener system is working properly or if you need to have a system installed.

Consult your regulatory or lending agency for required tests needed for any of the following:

- Adult Family Home
- Foster Care
- Adoption
- Daycare
- Maple syrup production
- Real Estate transaction
- Loan refinance