

Are you using unsafe river water in your home?

Community information

This information sheet is designed to inform people living in or visiting rural communities about the health risks associated with taking water from rivers and streams for domestic use.

Is it safe to use untreated water from a river or stream?

Untreated raw water should not be directly piped into homes or taken from rivers and streams for drinking or used in the kitchen or bathroom.

Water from rivers and streams may contain harmful microorganisms and chemicals that can make people sick.

Even in remote areas away from human habitation, harmful microorganisms from native animals are still a potential source of illness and, as waterways get closer to farming activities and country communities, the risk increases due to runoff from farms, houses and commercial activities.

It is important to note that:

- Consuming untreated river or stream water may lead to severe illness (for example, gastroenteritis). Children, the elderly, pregnant women and people with suppressed immunity are the most vulnerable.
- Guests or visitors may also become ill if they consume untreated river or stream water.

The risk of contamination increases when it rains, and during floods, as stormwater washes materials from tracks and roads into rivers and streams. Additionally, flooded properties often result in farm chemicals and sewage from septic tanks being washed into waterways.

Another risk is from algal blooms, which can be toxic to humans, domestic pets and livestock. Algal blooms can grow in dams, streams and even in unroofed water tanks under the right conditions.

Will boiling river water make it safe?

Boiling river water only kills harmful microorganisms. As water from rivers and streams in rural areas may also contain chemicals from activities such as farming, boiling the water will not effectively remove the chemical hazard (algal toxins could also be released into the water if harmful algae are present).

Can I treat river water to make it safe?

It is possible to treat water to remove some harmful microorganisms and chemicals. However, this is a specialist task that requires expensive filters and disinfection systems, and a degree of expertise to operate and maintain. These treatment systems also have their limitations and therefore may not remove all harmful microorganisms and chemicals.

What is the best way to source safe water where potable reticulated or mains water is not available?

Rainwater collected from your roof has been used for many generations in rural communities and is recognised as the most reliable and safest way to source water where a mains drinking water supply is not available. Groundwater can also be of high quality if bores are well maintained and protected.

For more information see the Department of Health and Human Services publication [Your private drinking water supply](#), available online at <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/water/private-drinking-water/rainwater>>

If your tank runs out of water, emergency supplies of drinking water can be obtained from local water carters. Contact your local water corporation for details of local water carters or look up the telephone directory under water carters.

Where can I find more information about drinking water safety?

Department of Health and Human Services

- Information is available online at the [Department's Water webpage](#) <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/water>>
- Contact the Water Unit:
 - phone 1300 761 874
 - [Email the Water Unit](#) <water@dhhs.vic.gov.au>

Your council Environmental Health Officer

For your local council contact details refer to your local telephone directory or refer to the [Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning website](#) at <<https://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/media-releases/know-your-council>>

To receive this document in another format phone 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or [email the Water Unit](#) <water@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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Available at the [Department of Health and Human Services webpage – Are you using unsafe river water in your home?](#)