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Environmental Health Division

Total Coliform in Drinking Water *Questions and Answers*

What is total coliform?

Total coliform is a group of bacteria that are present in great numbers at the earth's surface. A pure source of ground water will not have any total coliform bacteria because the soil layers act as a natural filtration of water that enters the ground from the surface. The presence of these bacteria in ground water is an indication that the sanitary condition of the water system has been compromised and that disease causing organisms may have contaminated the water. Testing for total coliform will not detect chemical contamination.

How long does the test take?

Results for the COLILERT method for coliform testing can be available in 24-48 hours.

How do I get this test done?

Most drinking water laboratories can provide total coliform testing. Our office can provide a list of certified drinking water labs upon request. Our office also provides processing of total coliform samples, including instruction on how to properly take and transport the sample and a specific bottle to use. Call us at 707-784-6765 or Email us at rmadmin@solanocounty.com for information or forms.

What does a positive result for coliform bacteria mean?

The detection of any amount of coliform bacteria in a water system is an indication that the water is potentially unsafe to drink. If the system serves a rental, daycare or persons other than your immediate family, they must be notified as to the potential health effects. They should also be told as to what precautionary measures could be taken to lessen possible harmful health effects. Notification information is available through Environmental Health.

What can be done to make the water safe again?

The water system must be evaluated to identify unsanitary conditions that could allow contamination to occur. If the cause is identified and corrected, the water system must be disinfected and retested to confirm that the coliform bacteria are no longer present. Handouts for identifying sources of well contamination and chlorination procedures are available at Environmental Health.

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Who can help evaluate and chlorinate the system?

An Environmental Health Specialist, certified distribution system operator, well contractor, or well pump installer can help in identifying the possible causes. The contractor or pump installer can repair and chlorinate the system.

How do I get Environmental Health clearance once the water system has tested positive for coliform bacteria?

The Environmental Health clearance consists of two negative coliform tests obtained from samples taken at least 24 hours apart. Chlorination must not occur between these samples and no chlorine residual can be detected in either sample. If a water system is consistently positive for coliform bacteria an evaluation inspection by an Environmental Health Specialist or other qualified professional will be required before further sampling is performed.

Tips

- For time sensitive issues such as an escrow closure, home loan approval, occupancy of new homes, well flooding, etc. coliform testing should be done early to allow for inspections and multiple samples if needed.
- Prior to testing for coliform bacteria do not chlorinate unless directed by Environmental Health. Sampling cannot be done on systems with detectable chlorine.
- Protect your drinking water source from pollution by properly maintaining all portions of your water system.