

Morrow-Umatilla Counties Drinking Water Roadmap



Nitrates - Frequently Asked Questions

What are nitrates?

Nitrate is a naturally occurring oxide of nitrogen. Nitrogen is present in the air and reacts with oxygen and ozone to produce nitrate. Nitrate is an essential component of living things and is a major part of animal manure, human sewage waste and commercial fertilizers. Nitrates can be associated with septic systems and have been used for centuries as fertilizers, in explosives, and as food preservatives.

How do nitrates affect my health?

Nitrate is a potential health hazard. Drinking water with high levels of nitrate can cause health effects such as Blue Baby Syndrome (or Methemoglobinemia) which is a decreased ability of blood to carry oxygen to tissues. Symptoms especially in infants can develop rapidly with health deteriorating over a period of days requiring immediate medical attention. There is also potential increased risk of recurrent respiratory infections, thyroid dysfunction, negative reproductive outcomes such as spontaneous abortion, and certain cancers including cancer of the stomach or bladder.

Can boiling water remove nitrates?

Boiling contaminated water does not remove nitrate and can increase nitrate concentrations.

Is any amount of nitrate safe?

Nitrate is measured in milligrams per liter (mg/L)*. The federal government has established a safe drinking water standard (also called maximum contaminant level) for nitrate as 10 mg/L. Water with nitrate levels above 10 mg/l should not be given to infants under 6 months old or use to make infant formula. It is advisable to switch to bottled water or other water low in nitrate

Can food be washed with nitrate-contaminated water?

If nitrate levels in your water are above 10 mg/L, do not use water to wash, prepare, and cook food for infants below the age of six months. It is advisable to use bottled water or other water low in nitrate.

How about a bath or shower using nitrate-contaminated water?

Nitrate does not easily enter the body through skin. Bathing, swimming, and showering with water that has high levels of nitrates over 10 mg/L is safe as long as you avoid swallowing the water. Children under six months of age should be supervised when they are bathing or brushing their teeth.

Contact information for your county public health department

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Umatilla County Public Health

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Morrow and Umatilla Counties are leading this project to develop long-term drinking water solutions in cooperation with state agencies.

