



## Frequently Asked Questions About Coliforms and Drinking Water

### What are coliforms?

Coliforms are a group of bacteria found in plant material, water, and soil. Coliforms are also present in the digestive tracts and feces of humans and animals. Most of the time, these bacteria are not harmful.

### Why does a water system test for coliforms?

Water systems test for indicators such as total coliforms, fecal coliforms, or *E. coli* to monitor water quality. If the water system has a positive test for one of these indicators, it can mean recent contamination with soil, human feces, or animal feces.

### What does a positive coliform test result mean?

A positive coliform test means possible contamination and a risk of waterborne disease. A positive test for total coliforms always requires more tests for fecal coliforms or *E. coli*. A confirmed positive test for fecal coliforms or *E. coli* means you need to take action as advised by your water system.

### Will coliform bacteria make me sick?

Most coliform bacteria are a normal part of the environment. They do not cause disease but do indicate the water might be contaminated by soil or feces. Some rare types of coliforms, such as *E. coli* O157:H7, can cause serious illness. Although most *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreaks are from eating raw or undercooked food, cases from contaminated drinking water can occur, but are rare.

### Why test for indicator organisms?

A biological pathogen is any organism, such as a bacteria, virus, protozoa, or parasite that causes a disease. Biological pathogens are commonly called “germs.” There are many different possible pathogens. It is not possible to test for every type of pathogen in every water sample, so water systems use indicators instead.

Water systems test for indicator organisms, like coliforms, to check for possible contamination by biological pathogens. Most coliforms are not harmful, but they come from the same sources as other bacteria and organisms that could make you sick.



## Frequently Asked Questions About Coliforms and Drinking Water, cont'd

### What are “indicator” organisms?

Indicator organisms come from the same sources as organisms that make you sick. Indicator organisms are easier to identify, are present in larger numbers, and respond to water treatment the same way as harmful bacteria and many other biological pathogens. A biological pathogen is any organism, such as a bacteria, virus, protozoa, or parasite that causes a disease. Biological pathogens are commonly called “germs.”

- **Total coliforms** is another term for the full group of coliforms. They are indicators of possible water contamination.
- **Fecal coliforms** are one type of coliform bacteria that is found mainly in animal digestive tracts and feces. Fecal coliforms are a more specific indicator of fecal contamination of water.
- ***E. coli (Escherichia coli)*** is a species of fecal coliform bacteria. *E. coli* almost always comes from animal feces. *E. coli* is considered the best indicator of fecal water contamination. If *E. coli* is present, harmful bacteria or other pathogens may also be present.

### For more information see or contact:

- [Personal Preparation and Storage of Safe Water](#): CDC provides guidance on the amount of water needed for good health, as well as how to prepare and store safe water before and during an emergency.
- [Hygiene and Handwashing](#): CDC provides guidance on alternative hygienic practices when water is not available or is contaminated.
- [A Guide to Water Filters](#): CDC maintains a guide for filters that remove *Cryptosporidium* or *Giardia*.
- EPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline: 1-800-426-4791
- [Consumer Information](#): EPA provides information and guidance about drinking water quality, emergencies, contaminants, public health issues, and treatment and storage.
- Local public health district:
  - **South Central Public Health District**  
(866) 710-9775  
[phd5.idaho.gov](http://phd5.idaho.gov)