

Testing your well water after a wildfire

Q: Who are these well water testing kits for?

Well water testing kits and lab analysis are available at no cost to people who use well water and were evacuated from areas where there were wildfires or active fire suppression throughout Nova Scotia. For residents affected by the Tantallon wildfire, this includes the Glen Arbour, Highland Park, Pockwock, Westwood and Yankeetown neighbourhoods.

Q: Do I need to test if I was evacuated but do not live in Glen Arbour, Highland Park, Pockwock, Westwood and Yankeetown neighbourhoods or near fire damage zones?

No, you do not need to test right now. It is recommended that you flush your well every time you have been absent for more than a few days to remove stagnant water from your well and plumbing. It's also recommended that you disinfect your system anytime you have lost power because your well may have depressurised.

Q: What subdivisions/streets were part of Evacuation Zones that can get free testing?

Glen Arbour, Highland Park, Pockwock, Westwood and Yankeetown neighbourhoods and homes in Barrington and Shelburne that were close to fire damaged areas.

Q: I want to test my well water today, but I can't get a kit. What do I do?

You cannot test your water until you complete the disinfection process. To prepare your well for testing, follow these steps outlined in this factsheet: <https://novascotia.ca/alerts/docs/using-well-water-after-wildfire.pdf>

Q: Where can I pick up a well water testing kit in the Tantallon area?

Well water testing kits are being distributed at the Hammonds Plains Community Centre at 711 Pockwock Drive and the Bedford Environment and Climate Change office, 30 Damascus Road, Suite 115. Distribution will be limited daily. Please note that these locations are subject to change as the local coordinators of the Recovery Centres are adapting to the needs of the community.

Q: Where can I pick up a well water testing kit in the Shelburne and Barrington areas?

People in Shelburne and Barrington will get test kits from their local Emergency Management team when the Information and Recovery Centres are stood up. Help will also be available to make sure people know how and when to test, and where to take their samples for analysis. It is essential that the disinfection process is completed first. You must drop off your sample on the same day you took it. Distribution will be limited daily. Please note that these locations are subject to change as the local coordinators of the Recovery Centres are adapting to the needs of the community. People living in this area can also pick up well water testing kits at the Environment and Climate Change regional offices in Bridgewater and Yarmouth.

Q: Can I return my samples directly to the lab?

No. Please do not deliver your samples directly to the lab. If you have received sample bottles, you will be told when and where to drop your samples off so that we can coordinate delivery of your samples to the lab efficiently.

Q: How long will it take to get my test results back?

Bacteria test results should be available within approximately 2-3 days, and chemical test results within approximately 5-7 business days after the samples have been received.

Q: I received my well water testing results. What do they mean?

After the lab sends you your results, use our Drinking Water Interpretation Tool to understand what the results mean: <https://novascotia.ca/nse/dwit/>

Q: Do I need to test my well ONLY if the fires came close to my home and the fire fighters used foam?

Your well water can become contaminated as a result of direct fire damage and indirect fire damage (e.g. loss of well pressure, power outages, equipment failure, seepage of contaminants etc.). Even if firefighting foam wasn't used in your area, you should test your well water to ensure it is safe.

Q: I already returned home and tested my well water. Can I be reimbursed for this cost?

Testing should not be done until flushing and disinfection has taken place. You should wait 5 days after you have disinfected before you test so that you can get an accurate result. If you live in an evacuated zone (Glen Arbour, Highland Park, Pockwock, Westwood and Yankeetown neighbourhoods) and have already completed testing, you will be reimbursed. More information about this will be made available in the coming days. Please keep your receipts.

Flushing and Disinfecting Wells Before Testing

Q: What are the exact steps we need to go through to make sure our well water is safe after a wildfire?

Please reference this fact sheet that outlines the steps you should take before using your well water for drinking and cooking: https://novascotia.ca/alerts/docs/using-well-water-after-wildfire.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2iWbVFy5kN3tFnjnKohcg_LQDr3WahgpiGdwRVXtALNajXIEtNvw3L6dw&mibextid=Zxz2cZ

Q: Is it really necessary to flush and disinfect my well first before testing?

Yes, this step is critical. The purpose of disinfecting a dug or drilled well is to destroy all disease-causing microorganisms (pathogens) that may have been introduced to your supply. This step is an important step to reduce potential health risks associated with drinking contaminated water. Testing before completing this step may identify that you have bacteria or chemicals built up in your well that will need to be addressed through flushing and disinfection.

Q: Will bleach disinfectant damage my well if I have high iron content in our water?

No. Bleach will not damage your well. Well disinfection is a common treatment method which involves flushing the water system with large amounts of bleach. Bleach disinfection can cause discoloration and sediment in the water as iron reacts with bleach. This discoloration is expected to be temporary and should clear up as you flush your well following disinfection. If water remains discolored after two or three days of normal use, you may need to investigate what is causing the issue.

Q: Is bleach the only thing that can be used to disinfect a well?

Health Canada recommends the use of bleach to disinfect a well. See Health Canada fact sheet here: <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/healthy-living/water-talk-information-private-well-owners/we-protect-eng.pdf>

Q: Is the process for flushing, disinfecting and testing different for a dug well versus a drilled well?

The process for flushing, disinfecting and testing is the same for both dug and drilled wells. If you have a home water treatment system, you should bypass your unit during flushing of chlorinated water. If you are unsure how to do this, contact your home treatment supplier.

Information on how to disinfect your well is available here: <https://novascotia.ca/nse/water/docs/DisinfectWaterWell.pdf>

To collect a sample for bacteria, follow the steps outlined here: <https://novascotia.ca/nse/water/docs/MicrobiologicalSamplingProcedure.pdf>

To collect a sample for typical chemical contaminants, follow the steps outlined here: https://novascotia.ca/nse/water/sample_chemical.asp

Water Safety for Drinking

Q: Is it safe to use my well water if I boil it first?

After disinfecting your well, water should be tested for coliform and E.coli bacteria. While waiting for the results, boil the water for at least one minute before using it or use bottled water. If there is damage to your oil tank or if fire retardants were used near the well, find an alternative water supply until you are able to test your well.

A well within the firefighting zone may have been impacted by chemicals beyond those captured in the standard suite of chemicals. It may be necessary to conduct specialized testing. Contact your local Environment and Climate Change office at 1-877-9ENVIRO (1-877-936-8476) for more information on specialized chemical testing. More information on boiling your water is available here:

<https://novascotia.ca/nse/water/docs/Boilwater-Factsheet.pdf>

Q: I am pregnant and have returned home after being evacuated and have already been drinking my well water. What should I do?

It's important that you switch to drinking bottled water and if you have any health concerns, contact your doctor. Continue to drink bottled water until you have confirmed your well is safe.

For Well Owners Who Were Not Impacted by Wildfires

Q: I was not evacuated, but I am still concerned about my well water. Can I still test my water?

Free testing is available for the people who were evacuated due to the wildfires and have wells. In Tantalton, that is limited to those in the Glen Arbour, Highland Park, Pockwock, Westwood and Yankeetown neighbourhoods. People returning to homes in areas where there was no fire/firefighting have no additional risk to drinking water.