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# Water Talk

## Drinking Water Quality in Canada

In nature, water is never “pure”. It picks up bits and pieces of everything it comes into contact with, including minerals, silt, vegetation, fertilizers, and agricultural run-off. Canada’s diverse physical geography—from its coastal regions to the mountains and the prairies, the northern tundra and the Canadian Shield—means that the characteristics of water vary greatly across the country. Even in relatively pristine areas, water in its natural state will likely require some type of treatment before it is safe to drink.

Drinking water in Canada comes either from underground sources (commonly called groundwater) such as aquifers, or from surface waters such as lakes and rivers. Most Canadians get their drinking water from public water systems that have to meet quality requirements set by provincial and territorial governments. In rural and remote areas, people may get their drinking water from wells or from surface water sources located on their own private property and are individually responsible for the safety of the drinking water.

### Roles and Responsibilities of Governments

Responsibility for the quality of drinking water is shared by all levels of government. The federal government plays a key role in the area of drinking water by, among other

things, leading the development of guidelines for drinking water and providing scientific and technical expertise to the provincial and territorial governments, through the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Committee on Drinking Water. As part of their management responsibilities, the provinces and territories are generally in charge of regulating drinking water systems, including setting quality standards and managing source waters, treatment plants and distribution systems. Municipalities are usually responsible for the actual treatment and distribution of drinking water to the public, except private home owners who draw drinking water from a source on their property. Because of the complexity of water issues, effective collaboration is key to maintaining drinking water quality.



For more information on drinking and recreational water quality issues:

Visit Health Canada's Water Quality Web site at:  
[www.healthcanada.gc.ca/waterquality](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/waterquality)

E-mail:  
[water\\_eau@hc-sc.gc.ca](mailto:water_eau@hc-sc.gc.ca)

Fax:  
613-952-2574

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### The Federal Government's Roles and Responsibilities

Health Canada publishes the *Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality*. These guidelines are developed by the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Committee on Drinking Water, made up of members from the federal, provincial and territorial government departments responsible for drinking water. Health Canada coordinates the activities of the Committee and provides scientific and technical expertise. The department also:

Canada 

- shares expertise and scientific advice with other government departments and organizations interested in drinking water issues, and the public;
- conducts scientific health assessments related to the *Guidelines*;
- conducts research into, and evaluations of, the safety of materials that come into contact with drinking water;
- coordinates the development of analytical methods for drinking water contaminants where they do not currently exist; and
- provides advice and assists in emergencies such as chemical spills, on request.

Health Canada's Water, Air and Climate Change Bureau is recognized as a World Health Organization/Pan American Health Organization (WHO/PAHO) Collaborating Centre for Water Quality, and participates in the development of WHO guidelines for drinking water. The Bureau also works closely and shares information with other government agencies such as the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Health Canada also carries out inspections for the safety of drinking water on common carriers such as ships and airplanes, and regulates the quality of pre-packaged water and ice and sets quality standards for these products. Because bottled water is considered a food under the *Food and Drugs Act*, inspections are carried out by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Several federal departments and agencies are directly responsible for providing drinking water in areas under federal jurisdiction, such as in national parks, military facilities, and other federal buildings. These departments and agencies include Public Works and Government Services, National Defense, Correctional Services Canada, Canada Customs Agency, Parks Canada, Transport Canada, Foreign Affairs Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada (Coast Guard), and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

### Drinking Water on First Nations Lands

In First Nations communities located south of 60°N, the responsibilities for drinking water are shared between First Nation Band Councils, Health Canada, and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC). Band Councils are

generally responsible for ensuring water facilities are designed, constructed, maintained and operated in accordance with established federal or provincial standards. INAC provides funding for constructing or upgrading water facilities, and covers a portion of the operation and maintenance costs. In some cases INAC provides funding to First Nations communities to share services, such as access to drinking water, with neighbouring municipalities. Health Canada ensures water quality monitoring programs are in place in First Nations communities.

In First Nations communities located north of 60°N, responsibilities for drinking water generally rest with the territorial governments.

### The Provincial and Territorial Governments' Roles and Responsibilities

Drinking water quality is primarily a provincial and territorial responsibility. Each province and territory has developed legislation and/or policies to protect the quality of drinking water from source to tap. All jurisdictions base their requirements on the *Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality* and enforce them either directly through legislation or regulation, or indirectly through licensing of treatment plants. Since the characteristics of drinking water vary greatly across the country, provincial and territorial authorities are best able to determine which guidelines need to be met locally.

In British Columbia, New Brunswick, and the territories, the authority for drinking water quality rests with ministries of health. In other provinces, this authority rests primarily with ministries of environment who collaborate closely with their counterparts in the health ministries when a concern about the safety of a drinking water supply is raised.

### Municipal Government Roles and Responsibilities

In most Canadian communities, drinking water is treated, stored and delivered to homes and businesses by a municipality. Municipal governments manage the day-to-day operation, maintenance and monitoring of the drinking water treatment plants and distribution system to ensure the water reaching consumers meets the required drinking water quality standards. If a citizen is concerned about his or her drinking water quality, the first resource to consult is the municipal service provider.