



FACT SHEET

Connecticut Department of Public Health
Environmental Health Section
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<http://www.ct.gov/dph/>

April 2011

What You Need To Know About: **MTBE in Private Well Water**

Methyl tertiary-butyl ether (MTBE) is found in some public and private groundwater drinking water wells in Connecticut. The US Environmental Protection Agency requires regular testing for this chemical in public water systems. Private wells can also contain MTBE, but testing in these wells must usually be done by the well owner.

This fact sheet addresses health concerns and testing questions about MTBE in private well water. For more information, please see the contact information at the end of this document.

What Is Methyl tertiary-butyl ether?

Methyl tertiary-butyl ether, also commonly known as MTBE, is a man-made chemical that was used in gasoline to make it burn cleaner. MTBE is no longer added to gasoline because it often got into the groundwater when storage tanks leaked or when gasoline was spilled on the ground. Even though MTBE is no longer used in gasoline, it can still be found in groundwater because it is slow to break down. MTBE levels in groundwater have been decreasing since it stopped being used in gasoline. We expect MTBE contamination of drinking water wells in Connecticut to be less of a concern in the future.

What Is The Hazard Associated With MTBE In Drinking Water?

MTBE causes sleepiness at very high levels. These effects go away quickly once exposure ends. Animal studies show that exposure over a long time to high levels of MTBE can cause kidney and liver damage, and an increase in cancer. However, it is unlikely that levels of MTBE typically found in drinking water would cause such health effects in people. Animal studies show that MTBE does not damage reproduction and is not likely to cause birth defects.

How Might I Be Exposed To MTBE From My Well Water?

MTBE evaporates easily from water, so in addition to taking it into your body through drinking, you may also be exposed to a large amount from breathing the air inside your home. MTBE gets into the indoor air from appliances that use water (such dishwashers and washing machines) and from the shower. Your body may also absorb it through the skin during a bath or shower. A simple way to absorb less is to turn on a bathroom fan while bathing or showering. This can prevent the buildup of MTBE in the bathroom air.

Is There A Safe Level Of MTBE In Drinking Water?

CT has set an Action Level of 70 micrograms per liter (ug/L) for MTBE in private well water. An Action Level is a state guideline for a chemical in private well water. When private well water has levels of a contaminant above the Action Level, it means that the CT Department of Environmental Protection (CT DEP) is authorized to give bottled water or a water treatment system to a resident. Action Levels are set well below the level that causes health effects in people or animals. So if a person has MTBE in their well water at levels above the Action Level, it is still probably at a level lower than what is harmful to a person's health. Nevertheless, you should not drink water if it has MTBE above the Action Level to be sure that you are protected.

There is no federal standard for MTBE in public drinking water. However, the US EPA has set a drinking water advisory of 20-40 ug/L for public water. This advisory level is based on taste and odor concerns and not on health effects. MTBE levels below this range should not cause water to have an unpleasant taste or odor.

How Can I Find Out If There Is a Problem With My Drinking Water?

The best way is to have your well water tested by a state-certified water testing lab. Instructions on how to find a lab in your area are found at the end of this fact sheet. You can also call CT DEP at (860) 424-3705, or your local health department, and ask if they are aware of a contamination problem in your neighborhood. CT DEP's "List of Contaminated or Potentially Contaminated Sites in Connecticut" can be found on the CT DEP web site (<http://www.ct.gov/dep>).

What Can Be Done If a Private Well Is Contaminated With MTBE?

If tests show that your well has MTBE you should call CT DEP at (860) 424-3705 and the local health department to report the problem. They may investigate to see where the contamination is coming from. If the levels are above the CT Action Level of 70 ug/L, CT DEP should be able to provide you with a temporary alternate source of drinking water such as bottled water or they may have a treatment system installed for your well. If MTBE levels are between 20 and 70 ug/L, your water is safe to drink but you may notice an unpleasant taste or odor. In such cases, you should call CT DEP for further assessment and re-testing of your drinking water. Depending on the results, and in consultation with CT DPH, CT DEP may be able to provide you with a temporary alternative source of drinking water or a treatment system.

Whom Can I Contact For More Information?

For answers to questions about MTBE in drinking water, contact the CT Department of Public Health or the CT DEP below:

Health Questions:

CT Dept. of Public Health
Environmental Health Section
Environmental & Occupational
Health Assessment Program
860- 509-7740
PO Box 340308, MS # 11CHA
Hartford, CT 06134-0308
<http://www.ct.gov/dph>

Treatment Questions:

To learn about treatment or report a contamination problem, call the CT Department of Environmental Protection (**860-424-3705**).

State Certified Laboratories:

Go to the DPH home page (<http://www.ct.gov/dph>) ; click on "Environmental Health," click on "Environmental Laboratories" and then scroll down to "List of Laboratories."