



Testing for Bacteria in Your Well Water

Coliform bacteria are a group of relatively harmless bacteria species present in soil and vegetation. Escherichia coli (or E Coli) is a specific coliform bacteria which indicates the presence of human or animal waste. A standard water test looks for total coliform bacteria and is used as an indicator of possible human or animal waste getting into the water. A positive test for coliforms does not mean that there are harmful bacteria in your water, but it does indicate that you may have a problem and need to look farther.

A water sample must be collected from an inside tap after running the water for 5 to 10 minutes first. If there is an aerator on the faucet it is a good idea to remove the aerator before collecting a sample. The sample must be collected into a sterile bottle provided by the laboratory. It is very important not to touch the inside of the sample bottle or lid.

The laboratory will analyze your well water for coliform bacteria. Since this will indicate harmless as well as potentially harmful bacteria the standard for both is zero, or “absent”.

If your test results indicate coliform bacteria are “present” you should not use the water for drinking, cooking, making ice cubes, brushing teeth or any other form of ingestion. Showering (with your mouth closed) and laundry are fine. The reason for the presence of bacteria should be determined and the source eliminated. Once that is done, the well and all the piping must be disinfected.

Many shallow, dug wells and springs have coliform bacteria naturally present and may never test absent for bacteria. It is rare for an underground vein of water (drilled bedrock well) to have coliform bacteria.

If you have a drilled well and your result was “present” it can be due to a variety of causes. These include collecting the sample from a hose or outside spigot, a flooded well pit, a poor seal on the top of the well, a cracked well casing or similar situation. This will likely require a professional well company to determine the cause and repair it.