



NEWS

MONTGOMERY COUNTY OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS
COURT HOUSE, NORRISTOWN, PA., BOX 311, 19404-0311

Frank X. Custer, Communications Director

Jessica Willingham, Communications Assistant

PHONE (610) 278-3061 FAX (610) 278-5943

COMMISSIONERS: JOSH SHAPIRO, *Chair*

VALERIE A. ARKOOSH, MD, MPH, *Vice Chair*

BRUCE L. CASTOR, JR., *Commissioner*



RELEASE: May 7, 2015

Drinking Water Week Facts from the Montgomery County Health Department
Leonard Olu-Williams, MPH, Public Health Information Analyst

Norristown, PA (May 7, 2015) – Each year, the American Water Works Association and an alliance of organizations, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), sponsor Drinking Water Week (May 3 to May 9, 2015) to highlight the importance of tap water and the need to reinvest in water infrastructure. Tap water plays a critical role in the success of a society from maintaining life to supporting industrial, agricultural, medical, and recreational activities.

During the past century, many improvements in the health, prosperity, and longevity of the U.S. population can be attributed to improvements in water quality. One hundred years ago, life expectancy in the United States was only 47 years. Today, life expectancy is 78 years. This short life span was partially due to sickness and death from diseases spread through drinking water, like typhoid fever. Though these diseases are still common in lesser developed countries, over the last century, treatment, disinfection, and the environmental regulation of water contaminants have made U.S. tap water one of the safest drinking water supplies in the world.

Despite the safety of U.S. tap water, new challenges require continued work to protect the water supply. A primary concern is that the drinking water infrastructure, which includes the pipes that bring water to American homes, is aging and needs to be upgraded or replaced. Other challenges include climate change impacts on water availability and quality, chemical and toxin contamination of water sources, and the increasing need to reuse and recycle water.

Drinking water comes from a variety of sources including public water systems, private wells, and bottled water. Ensuring safe and healthy drinking water may be as simple as turning on the tap from an EPA-regulated public water system. Other water sources may need a treatment unit or an

inspection to ensure a septic tank is not too close to a private well. It is important to know where drinking water comes from, how it's treated, and if it's safe to drink.

There are two types of drinking water systems in the United States:

- Public water systems that are subject to United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations
- Individual water systems that are not subject to EPA regulations

According to the EPA, approximately 286 million Americans receive their tap water from a community water system. These public water systems are monitored and regulated as set by the EPA. Tap water not only provides people with water for daily activities (like drinking, bathing, and cooking), but also can deliver fluoride (in participating community water supplies) to reduce the potential for tooth decay.

An estimated 15% of Americans, or about 45 million people, get their water from private ground water wells that are not subject to EPA regulations. Private ground water wells can provide safe, clean water. However, well water can also become contaminated, leading to illness. It is the responsibility of well owners to maintain and treat their wells.

As a result of environmental regulations, such as the Clean Water Act (passed in 1972), many sources of water pollution—particularly sewage—have been reduced over the years. However, treating water to remove or kill disease-causing contaminants is still critical. Contamination of drinking water sources can occur at multiple points, including in the source water, through inadequate water treatment, in storage tanks, and in drinking water distribution systems (the pipes that carry water to homes, businesses, schools, and other buildings).

EPA regulations that protect public drinking water systems do not apply to privately owned wells (although some states do regulate private wells). As a result, millions of Americans who get their water from private wells are responsible for ensuring that their water is safe from contaminants. A local health department or well water system professional can provide assistance on well maintenance, new well construction, and water quality testing. For more information on well maintenance and testing, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Private Ground Water Wells webpage: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/drinking/private/wells/>.

MCHD's Role in Keeping Drinking Water Safe:

The Montgomery County Health Department (MCHD) Division of Water Quality Management (WQM) strives to preserve, protect, and promote water resources in the county. This is accomplished in a

variety of ways. The division's administration of the Individual Water Supply program ensures private water supplies are located, permitted, and installed correctly, as well as tested and treated, as needed, to guarantee a safe potable supply. WQM's oversight of the On-lot Sewage program makes sure sewage systems are located, permitted, and installed properly to keep untreated sewage from reaching surface waters and entering groundwater. Division staff also conducts monthly monitoring of groundwater levels within the county well network which is intended to assist municipalities with conservation methods during times of drought. Additionally, WQM staff investigates well water complaints, samples the water as needed, and informs residents of potential health effects and methods to treat their individual supply.

Drinking Water Week is dedicated to educating residents about the importance of their drinking water. Residents should strive to remain vigilant of this precious natural resource, and become informed of ways to conserve and to protect their water from pollution.

To learn more about Drinking Water Week, please visit
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/observances/dww.html>.