

FINDING AND COLLECTING WATER IN AN EMERGENCY

After your stored water, the next water to use is already in your home: FEMA lists the water heater, the pipes, and ice cubes. Rainwater, streams, ponds, lakes, and springs can be used too, but only after you treat the water.

Reviewed October 30, 2026

When the water stops or the supply is contaminated, stored water comes first (see emergency water for how much to keep). These skills are for finding more. EPA says bottled water is your best choice, that you may find more by melting ice cubes or draining your hot water tank or pipes, and that you should treat the water regardless of the source. This page does not repeat treatment steps: boiling, bleach amounts, tablets, and filters are all on the emergency water page.

Ready.gov says to drink water you know is not contaminated first. If you cannot treat suspicious water, put off drinking it as long as possible, but do not become dehydrated.

PROTECTING THE WATER IN YOUR HOME

Use this when you hear reports of broken water or sewer lines, or local officials tell you there is a problem with the supply.

Steps from FEMA:

1. Find your home's main water valve before an emergency.
2. To shut off incoming water, turn the main valve to the closed position.
3. Make sure everyone in the household knows where the valve is and how to close it.

Check: after closing the valve, a faucet run briefly should slow to a stop. For more on shutting off utilities, see how to shut off water, gas, and electricity.

DRAINING WATER FROM YOUR PIPES

Use this after the supply has stopped, to collect the water still sitting in your plumbing.

Steps from FEMA:

1. Turn on the faucet at the highest point in your home to let air into the plumbing. A small amount of water will trickle out.
2. Get water from the lowest faucet in the home.
3. Collect it in clean containers with covers.
4. Treat it before drinking, as EPA advises for any source.

Check: water flows from the lowest faucet once the top faucet is open.

DRAINING THE WATER HEATER

Use this to get the water stored in a hot water tank.

Steps from FEMA:

1. Make sure the electricity or gas to the water heater is off.
2. Open the drain at the bottom of the tank.
3. Start the water flowing by turning off the water intake valve at the tank and turning on a hot water faucet.
4. Catch the water in clean containers, and treat it before drinking (EPA).
5. Refill the tank before you turn the gas or electricity back on.

Check: the tank is full again before any power or gas goes back on.

■ WARNING

If the gas was turned off, FEMA says a professional will be needed to turn it back on (FEMA).

COLLECTING RAINWATER

Use this when it rains and you need water, first for washing and flushing, and for drinking only after treatment.

CDC says rainwater is not necessarily safe to drink without first removing germs and chemicals. It picks up dust and smoke from the air, chemicals from roofs, gutters, and pipes, and dirt and germs such as bird droppings from the roof.

1. Use rainwater first for things you will not swallow. CDC gives examples: watering plants you do not eat and washing items you do not use for cooking or eating.
2. If you can, send the first rain off the roof away from your container. CDC describes a “first flush diverter” that does this, because the first flow picks up the most dirt, germs, and chemicals.

3. Screen the opening to keep out bugs and debris.
4. Empty a rain barrel at least every 10 days, or screen it, to keep mosquitoes from laying eggs in it (CDC).
5. Keep rainwater separate from bottled or tap water. CDC says mixing it in can make the treated water less safe, and rainwater must not get into the pipes that carry drinking water.
6. Treat rainwater before you drink it (see emergency water).

Check: your rainwater container is covered or screened, labeled, and kept apart from your drinking supply.

■ **WARNING**

After a flood or hurricane, CDC says to avoid using water from a cistern with open connections, such as gutters or overflows, that may have filled with storm debris or floodwater. Use your stored emergency water instead and ask your health department what to do before using the cistern again (CDC). Some states also regulate rainwater collection (CDC).

CHOOSING AN OUTDOOR WATER SOURCE

Use this only when stored water and the water in your home have run out.

1. Look for the sources FEMA lists: rainwater; streams, rivers, and other moving water; ponds and lakes; and natural springs.
2. Choose flowing water over still, stagnant water when you can. EPA says flowing water is generally better.
3. Skip any water with floating material in it, a dark color, or an odor (FEMA, EPA).
4. Use saltwater only if you distill it first (FEMA).
5. Treat all of it before drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth. The methods are on the emergency water page.

Check: the water you collected is clear of floating material, has no odor or dark color, and is set aside for treatment.

KNOWING WHICH WATER TO AVOID

Use this before you drink from any source you are unsure about. Some water cannot be made safe by boiling or bleach.

1. Do not drink water from toilet flush tanks or bowls, waterbeds, or swimming pools and spas (FEMA).

2. Never use water from radiators or boilers that are part of your home heating system for drinking, cooking, or hygiene (CDC).
3. Do not drink floodwater (FEMA). CDC says it can contain sewage and household, medical, and industrial hazardous waste.
4. Do not drink water you know or suspect has fuel or toxic chemicals in it. CDC says boiling or disinfecting cannot make it safe: use bottled water or another source, and contact your health department.

Check: you can name the four sources above without looking.

■ **WARNING**

After a radiation emergency, CDC says boiling tap water will not remove radioactive material, and bottled water is the only water free of contamination until officials say other sources are safe. Drinks in sealed containers are safe. CDC also says water in a hot water heater, or in a toilet tank (not the bowl), will be free of radioactive material, and that if those are not available, you should use tap water to stay hydrated (CDC). FEMA's general guidance says not to drink from toilet tanks, so if you must use tank water, treat it for germs first, as EPA advises for any source. See shelter in place.

PRACTICE LIST

SKILLS

- ☐ Protecting the water in your home: main valve found and closed once
- ☐ Draining water from your pipes: highest and lowest faucets identified
- ☐ Draining the water heater: drain valve and intake valve located
- ☐ Collecting rainwater: covered, screened container kept apart from drinking water
- ☐ Choosing an outdoor water source: nearest stream, pond, or spring noted
- ☐ Knowing which water to avoid

TRACK

Survival skills

SHEET

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REVIEWEDOctober 30, 2026

COMPILED FROM THESE SOURCES

- 1.** FEMA, Food and Water in an Emergency (PDF)
- 2.** EPA, Emergency Disinfection of Drinking Water
- 3.** CDC, How to Make Water Safe in an Emergency
- 4.** CDC, Collecting Rainwater and Your Health: An Overview
- 5.** CDC, Cistern Safety and Disasters: Before, During, and After
- 6.** CDC, Safety Guidelines: Floodwater
- 7.** CDC, Food, Drinking Water, and Medicine Safety in a Radiation Emergency
- 8.** Ready.gov, Water

Every safety claim on this sheet links to its primary source.