

Water Quality - How do you know your water is safe?

Drinking water, including bottled water, may reasonably be expected to contain at least small amounts of some contaminants. The presence of contaminants does not necessarily indicate that water poses a health risk.

Under the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA), the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sets national limits on contaminant levels to ensure the safety of your drinking water. These limits are known as Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs). For some contaminants, the monitoring techniques may be unreliable, too expensive, or too difficult to perform. In these cases, the EPA establishes treatment technique requirements instead of an MCL: if it cannot be determined that a contaminant is not there, systems operate as if it is and provide the treatment necessary to produce safe drinking water. The EPA regulations also specify testing and reporting requirements for each contaminant. Something every regulation has in common is a requirement to notify the public if there is a regulation violation. If a regulation is violated the supplier is required to inform the consumers being served by the system. The EPA also requires water suppliers to monitor for unregulated contaminants to provide occurrence data for future regulations.

The EPA has established regulations for 88 individual contaminants. These include: 8 microbiological contaminants, 4 radionuclides, 16 inorganic chemicals, 53 organic chemicals, 3 disinfectants, and 4 disinfection byproducts. The SDWA requires EPA to review and revise each regulation on a regular basis. For example, the MCL for trihalomethanes was lowered from 100 to 80 ug/L (parts per billion) as part of a review completed in 1997. The 1996 reauthorization of the SDWA also requires the EPA to consider at least 5 new contaminants for regulation every 5 years.

In New York, the State Health Department is responsible for enforcing EPA's regulations. The State has the option to implement alternative regulations when the alternative is equivalent to or more stringent than the EPA's regulation. In Onondaga County, due to the strength of the local unit, the State Health Department has delegated its primary enforcement and surveillance activities to the Onondaga County Health Department. The County Health Department reviews and approves all treatment plant and distribution system modifications as well as new construction. They also review all our operating and monitoring data for compliance each month. The Authority takes a similar, cooperative approach with the Health Departments in Oswego, Oneida, Madison and Cayuga counties.

The Authority uses a combination of internal and external laboratories to conduct over 20,500 tests during a typical year. OCWA operates three state certified testing laboratories: one at our Otisco Lake Water Treatment Plant, one at our Lake Ontario Water Treatment Plant and one at our headquarters building outside Syracuse. We also utilize several outside certified testing laboratories, including PACE Analytical, Life Science Laboratories, Eurofins Eaton Analytical, Analytical Services Inc. and Upstate Freshwater Institute.

OCWA's raw water monitoring programs are specifically designed to address concerns about Otisco Lake and Lake Ontario as they serve as our main sources of supply. In both instances, raw water intakes extend from a mile to a mile and a half out into their respective lakes. This was done by design to minimize the effects of near shore currents and run-off. Lab results consistently confirm that levels of organic compounds and heavy metals do not exceed the applicable MCLs. General raw water quality remains high for both Otisco Lake and Lake Ontario. Both sources are monitored more frequently, and for a wider range of compounds, than required.

A water quality summary is provided for each of the two supplies, along with Skaneateles Lake, in the tables included in the appendix found at the end of this report. More detailed information can be obtained by calling OCWA's Water Quality Department at 315-455-7061 ext. 3157.

Additional information on contaminants and potential health effects can be obtained by calling EPA's "Safe Drinking Water Hotline" at 1-800-426-4791.