



World Health
Organization

Safe drinking water

AIDE-MEMOIRE

For enhanced country action to guarantee access to safe drinking water



© WHO / Ala Kheir

Safely managed drinking-water, located on premises, available when needed, and free from contamination – is important for public health. It is a human right recognised by the UN General Assembly. However, at least 2.2 billion people still lived without safely managed services in 2022.

Microbial contamination of drinking water, primarily through faeces, poses the greatest risk to drinking-water safety. Absent, inadequate, or inappropriately managed water and sanitation services expose individuals to preventable health risks (e.g., diarrhoea, cholera, hepatitis A, polio, etc.). Drinking water can also be contaminated by chemicals and radiation. Safe and sufficient water is essential for basic hygiene.

As a result of climate change and population growth, the number of people in water-stressed countries is expected to increase in some regions. The most impacted groups include rural areas, and women and children.

WHO support to countries

- Advises governments on the development and implementation of health-based targets and regulations, such as the Guidelines for drinking-water quality, through the development of guidance material and direct country support.
- Supports the implementation of Water Safety Plans to ensure the safety of drinking water.
- Compiles country data on drinking-water, sanitation and hygiene through: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP); UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking-Water (GLAAS); and the development of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) accounts using the TrackFin methodology.
- Provides national data on burden of disease from poor WASH.
- Provides guidance on WASH as a core element of health emergency preparedness, response and recovery.
- Provides a compendium of available interventions to guarantee access to safe drinking water.
- Highlights co-benefits of reducing exposure to poor WASH to other sectors, such as improving food safety, and reducing health inequalities.
- Provides awareness-raising and advocacy materials on WASH and health.
- Provides support for WASH in healthcare facilities by using WASH-FIT (Water and Sanitation for Health Facility Improvement Tool).

✓ Checklist

Situation assessment

- ☐ Hazards in drinking water identified using the Water Safety Plan
- ☐ Independent surveillance conducted

Policies & actions

- ☐ National regulations and standards established based on the WHO Guidelines for drinking-water quality
- ☐ Water Safety Plan implemented
- ☐ Safe drinking water included in relevant health policies, strategies and programmes
- ☐ Chemicals and radiation in drinking water safely managed
- ☐ Waste management programmes to prevent the entry of waste in the water cycle in place
- ☐ Intersectoral cooperation initiated to achieve accessible and safe drinking water in all settings.

Awareness raising & capacity building

- ☐ Information about existing technical resources provided
- ☐ Recommendations from the drinking water guidelines to promote the use of safe-drinking water in all settings distributed
- ☐ Contact with drinking water or water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) focal point in key ministries and key partners established
- ☐ Information about health benefits of having safe drinking water provided

Key elements for country action

Governance

- The health sector needs to cooperate across sectors, such as health, housing, and education to achieve accessible and safe drinking water in all settings.
- Ensure health gains from accessing safe drinking water are considered in all relevant policies outside the health sector.
- Increase awareness about the health benefits of ensuring access to safe drinking water among decision makers and the public.
- Understand the national status of access to drinking water.
- Strengthen systems for regulating drinking-water.

Policies and regulations

- Based on the WHO guidelines for drinking-water quality, develop/update/adapt national regulations and standards.
- Use Water Safety Plans to identify the hazards, define and implement measures to reduce the risk to drinking-water supplies.
- Include safe-drinking water in relevant health policies, strategies and programmes.

Planning and assessment

- Ensure incremental progress in providing sufficient and safe-drinking water in communities, schools, health care facilities, workplaces and public places by:
 - (i) constructing or improving water supply systems or services;
 - and (ii) conducting risk assessment and management approaches to ensure its success and sustainability.
- Confirm water safety through independent surveillance.
- Improve recycling programmes and minimize inappropriate disposal to prevent the entry of pharmaceuticals and microplastics in the water cycle.
- Promote point-of-use/household drinking-water treatment and safe storage as an interim solution for safer drinking-water until longer-term infrastructure improvements are implemented.
- Manage chemicals and radiation in drinking water by selecting priority parameters, reducing concentration of these contaminants, and monitoring.

Awareness raising and capacity building

- Based on the key recommendations in the drinking water guidelines, promote the use of safe drinking-water in communities, schools, health care facilities, workplaces and public places to protect vulnerable groups.
- Be familiarized with the existing technical resources (e.g., Water safety planning roadmap, WHO water safety webpage).
- Liaise with key drinking-water or WASH focal point in relevant ministries and key partners, to identify opportunities for joint advocacy using WHO-produced monitoring data.

Additional information:



Main resources:

- <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>
- [Drinking-water quality guidelines](#)
- [Drinking-water quality regulation](#)
- [Water safety planning](#)
- [Compendium of WHO and other UN guidance on health and environment \(WHO, 2024\)](#)
- [WHO WASH 3-Level SharePoint & Repository](#)
- <https://www.who.int/teams/environment-climate-change-and-health/water-sanitation-and-health/>

Please note: This aide mémoire (version 1, October 2024) provides summary information on safe drinking water and health. More detail on WASH and other environmental health topics is provided in various other materials.