

Household Water Quality

Amherst County 2009-2015

The Virginia Household Water Quality Program provides affordable water testing and education through local Extension offices to the 1.7 million Virginians who rely on wells, springs or cisterns for their household water supply.

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What's in your water?

Municipal water supplies are regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Act, which mandates routine testing and treatment. Maintenance and testing of private water supplies (wells, springs and cisterns) is the responsibility of the owner. Virginia Cooperative Extension offers water testing and education for private water supply users across the state

Drinking water clinics are held in county Extension offices each year. Here's how it works:

#1 Kickoff Meeting

Participation is voluntary and open to anyone with a well, spring or cistern. Participants pick up a sample kit and receive instructions about how to collect the samples from their household tap and where and when to drop off their samples.

#2 Sampling

Following directions carefully, participants collect their samples and complete a short questionnaire. Samples are dropped off locally, so shipping is unnecessary. We coordinate getting the samples to Virginia Tech's campus for analysis.

#3 Analysis

Samples are analyzed for total coliform and E. coli bacteria, nitrate, lead, copper, arsenic, fluoride, sodium, hardness, iron, manganese, total dissolved solids, pH, and sulfate. The cost for one sample kit in 2015 was \$50. Confidential results are prepared and returned to the Extension office.

#4 Results

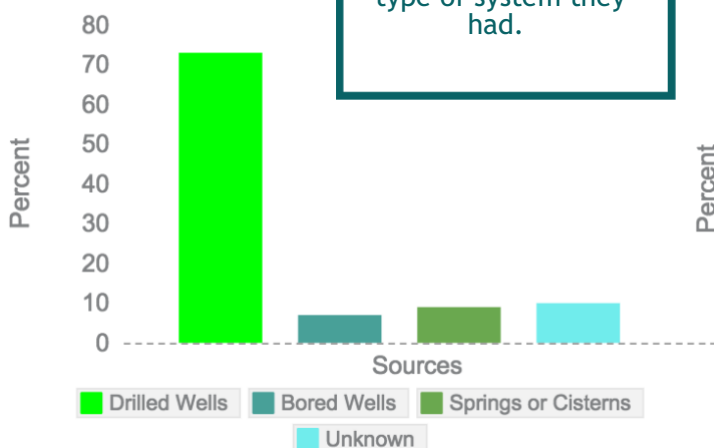
Results are returned to participants and explained at a local interpretation meeting. Information is provided about addressing water quality problems, routine care, and maintenance of private water supplies.

Water systems in Amherst County (2009 - 2015)

82 samples analyzed
Serving 164 people
Well depth: 30 to 437 feet
Well age: 6 to 69 years

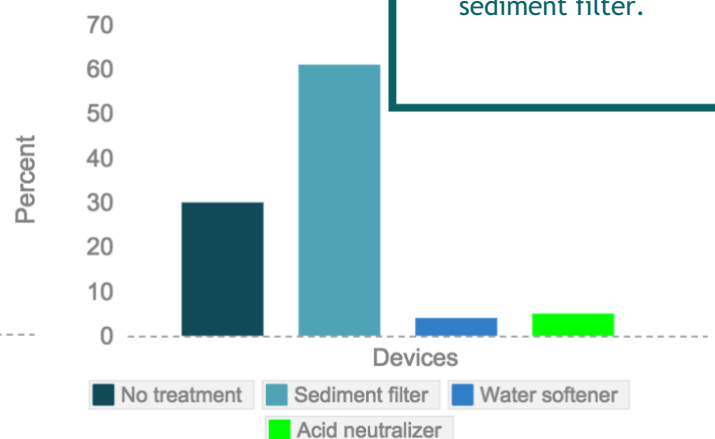
Systems

Drilled wells are most common. Ten percent of participants did not know what type of system they had.



Treatment

70% of participants reported having treatment installed. The most common device was a sediment filter.



Where do contaminants come from?

Contaminants in water may be health-related (e.g., bacteria) or a nuisance (e.g., hardness causing scale) and can come from a variety of sources.

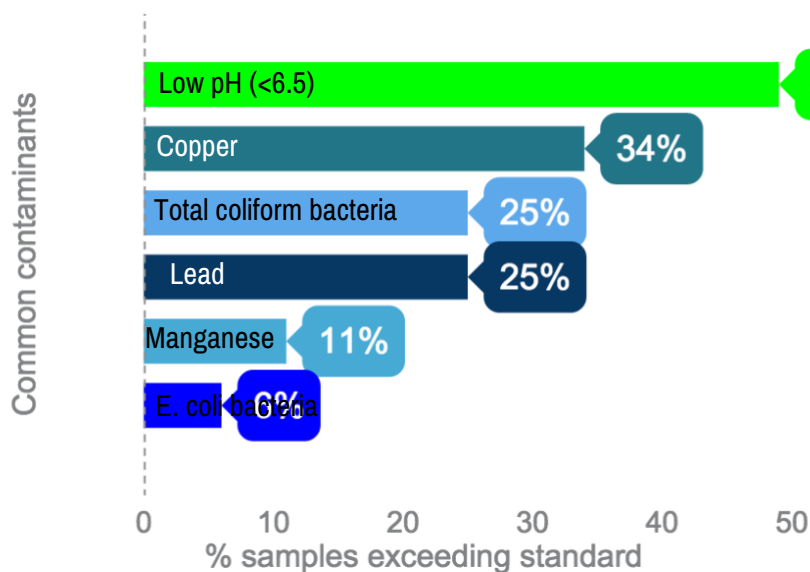
Some contaminants originate from geology, the sediment or rock where the water is stored. Others are a result of land usage or activities on the earth's surface, such as lawn fertilizer, animal waste, or chemical spills.

Proper construction of a well can protect household water quality by preventing surface water, which may carry many contaminants, from entering the groundwater supply. Wells should be constructed with proper casing, grout seal, and a sealed well cap. Contamination sources, such as livestock and septic systems should be at least 50 feet away from the well head.

Treatment devices and plumbing components can also influence water quality by adding contaminants or changing water chemistry.



Household water quality in Amherst County: Common Contaminants



The most common contaminants found in household water in Amherst County were low pH, lead, copper, total coliform bacteria, nitrate, manganese, and E. coli.

Total coliform bacteria presence is an indication that surface water may be entering a well and other more harmful microorganisms may be present. Total coliform were present in 25% of Amherst county samples. E. coli were found in 6% of Amherst county samples and are a sign that human or animal waste is entering the water supply.

Low pH (<6.5) can occur naturally in parts of Virginia geology, and in Amherst, pH below 6.5 was found in 49% of samples. Although not a concern in itself, low pH can be a driver of how corrosive the water is, and once the water enters the house, can result in metals such as copper and lead leaching into the water from plumbing components that contain these metals, such as brass fittings or copper pipes. Lead was found in first draw samples exceeding 0.015 mg/L in 25% of samples, and copper exceeding 1 mg/L in 34% of samples.

For information about other common contaminants, please visit our [Resources Page](#).

Manganese, a nuisance contaminant, was an issue in 11% of Amherst samples.

Special thanks to the residents of Amherst County who participated in the Virginia Household Water Quality Program drinking water clinics held in 2009-2015. Extension agents Bill Seay and Alyssa Elliott, among other partners, were instrumental in the program's success.

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