****Maine CDC Environmental & Occupational Health Programs

**Well Water Talking Points and FAQs**

**For Community Events**

June 4, 2014

**Talking Points**

1. Everyone with a well needs to test their well water—this is especially important if you have young kids in the house or have a baby on the way. Take a brochure on testing your well water. Use the schedule in the brochure to find out how often to test.
2. Many of the things we find in Maine well water are especially harmful for young children or developing fetuses because they affect development and growth of the brain or other organs or body systems. We worry about chemicals like arsenic, uranium, manganese, fluoride, lead, and nitrate.
3. These chemicals\* are also potentially harmful for older children and adults too. Some of the chemicals we often find in Maine well water can cause cancer, kidney problems, and damage to teeth and bones. It is important to know that your chance of getting sick depends on how long you were drinking the water and the amount of the chemical you have in your water. And you should know that most times, problems with well water can be fixed relatively easily.
4. Many Maine wells have too much arsenic, uranium, manganese, radon or fluoride. (You can print out maps from the Maine Tracking Network to show people contaminant levels in your area.) We know about some hotspots in the state and in this area. For example (Fill in information specific to your community from the Maine Tracking Network about percent of wells that exceed health standards for arsenic or other contaminants). We also know that not as many folks have tested their water as we would like. Only about XX% have tested their water for arsenic in [county, area, district].
5. A water test is pretty easy thing to do. There is a very short video on YouTube that can show you what to do. The most important things to remember when doing a test are to 1) Follow the directions that come with the test kit; 2) Take care not to contaminate the bottle or the bottle cap by touching the inside of the bottle or the inside of the cap; 3) Take off the strainer on your faucet before you fill the bottles up; 4) make sure you return the samples of your water to the lab within the time indicated in the directions because certain tests have to be done within a short amount of time.

\*We try to use the word chemical instead of contaminant because contaminant implies some kind external source of the pollution when most of these are naturally occurring.

**Sample questions to engage event participants**

* Do you get your water from a private well?
* Have you ever tested your well water?
* When was the last time you tested your well water?
* Why haven’t you tested your well water?
* Do you know anyone who has had a problem with their well water?

**Frequently Asked Questions and Answers**

**Q: Where do all of these chemicals come from?**

Things like arsenic, uranium, manganese, fluoride are naturally occurring. They are in the rocks that make up the land and they dissolve in water and get into wells that way. Nitrate comes from fertilizers or leaky septic systems. Lead can come from the plumbing in your house. Other contaminants are germs—like bacteria and viruses that can get in well water, usually when there is a problem with the well or the well is a dug well or a shallow well.

**Q: How much does a well water test cost?**

It depends on what kind of test you need. The test you need every year for bacteria, nitrate, and nitrite costs between $30 and $50. The test you need every 3-5 years includes more chemicals and costs between $70 and $100. Prices vary by the lab you use.

**Q: How do I get a test or know what I need to test for?**

Use the brochure to find out what you should test for. Call a lab and tell them what you want to test for and they will determine what kind of test you need.

**Q: When is a good time to test well water?**

Late summer is a good time to test for germs (bacteria) and nitrates. We don’t think it matters what time of year you test for chemicals like arsenic, uranium, fluoride—these are in the test you need every 3-5 years.

**Q: What lab should I use?**

That is up to you. We have a list of certified labs on the back of our brochure, but you should check online at wellwater.maine.gov to find the most recent list. Labs must be certified to do the tests.

**Q: What do I do if I have a high level of something in my water?**

Call the Maine CDC offices to discuss the results of any water test with an expert. They can help you figure out what you need to do. The number is on the brochure and most labs give out our number with their results. 866.292.3474 toll-free in Maine, or 287-4311.

**Q: How much is too much arsenic (or other contaminant)?**

State and federal governments set thresholds for arsenic and the other chemicals we often find in Maine well water. In general, we don’t recommend any action to treat well water or reduce the amount a person drinks or uses for cooking unless the well water has a level that is above the guideline for a given contaminant.

**Q: I have (health problem), and I have a lot of (arsenic, or other) in my well water. Do you think that my health problem is the result of drinking my water?**

Maybe, maybe not. It is usually very hard to determine if drinking water with a high level of a chemical is the cause of an individual’s health problem. Often we can never be sure. This is a good discussion to have with your health care provider. And if you have a lot of a chemical in your water, you should take steps to reduce how much you drink. What you do will depend on what and how much you have in your water. Call the Maine CDC to discuss your options. 866.292.3474 toll-free in Maine or 287-4311.

**Q: What can be done if you have too much of something in your water?**

It depends on what is causing the problem and how much you have. Sometimes the solution is as simple as getting a water softener. If you have too little fluoride you may need to get fluoride drops (a supplement) for children in your household. For things like too much arsenic you may need to install a treatment system that gets rid of the arsenic before you drink the water. But you don’t know what you’ll need—if anything—until you test your water. Call the Maine CDC to discuss your options. 866.292.3474 toll-free in Maine or 287-4311.

**Q: What if my neighbor tested his/her well water and it was fine?**

There are so many things that influence what is in well water, such as the type and depth of a well. There is no good way to predict what is in the water of any given well. The only way to know what’s in your water is to test it.

**Q: Fluoride can be a problem? I thought we need fluoride for healthy teeth?**

Fluoride is tricky because it is a problem if you don’t have enough and it is a problem if you have too much—and the “window” for a healthy amount of fluoride is narrow. Too little fluoride and it is harder to fight tooth decay. Too much fluoride can cause teeth staining.

**Q: What about radon?**

Radon is a problem in lots of Maine homes—and it may not just be in the air, it could also be in your well water too. Radon in water is interesting because you don’t drink radon—instead it is a gas in your water so when you run the faucet, dishwasher, washing machine, shower, etc., the gas escapes out of the water into the air. Then you breathe in the radon. Too much radon can cause lung cancer and next to smoking radon is the leading cause of lung cancer. That’s why it is important to test your air and well water for radon. You can call us to get a list of labs that are certified to test for air and water radon. Radon is not included in all standard water test kits (and is not included in the free water test kits we are distributing).

**Q: What about uranium? If I have uranium in my water, does that mean my water is radioactive?**

What we are concerned about with uranium is the harm it can cause to kidneys – which isn’t a result of its radioactivity. Unless you have a very, very, very high level of uranium we don’t worry about the radioactivity of uranium.