

Our water Quality

Some causes of water odor, taste, color

We commonly treat taste and flavor as one and the same, but flavor is considered by water-tasting experts to be the combination of taste plus odor. The American Water Works Association has even published a drinking water taste and odor wheel. The appeal of water to an individual is very personal and often represents similarity with the water to which one is most accustomed.

Water is truly the universal solvent, taking on various attributes of minerals and substances with which it comes in contact. Consumers pay good money for (mostly) imported spring and mineral bottled waters because of their distinctive taste and perceived purity. But let's keep it simple and look at water attributes we are likely to observe in our local water.

TASTE. The most commonly perceived taste of city water is what we would describe as "chlorine" or a similar taste (and odor) contributed by disinfection processes. The amount of this substance in municipal water varies highly with respect to the location of its final destination to the treatment station and transmission pipelines. The EPA allows up to 4 parts per million of chlorine in municipal systems and requires a residual level of chlorine be present to protect treated water throughout the distribution system. As a frame of reference, a chlorine level as high as 3 ppm is often enough to close a public swimming pool. If your infrastructure is intact and microbiologically safe, your household water should not need disinfection and you can easily remove the chlorine at the point of entry.

A salty taste in untreated water is usually caused by high levels of naturally-occurring sodium, magnesium, or potassium. A metallic taste may be related to minerals such as iron, manganese, copper, and zinc that may leach into water from pipes and infrastructure components. In well water, high chloride-ion concentrations can produce a salty taste, as will sulfate, which may also have a laxative effect.



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ODOR. A sulfurous or rotten-egg odor is commonly caused by leaving your water heater setting too low, thus allowing bacteria to grow. Check to see if the smell is in the hot water only. Moldy, musty, earth, grassy or fishy odors may be organic matter in the water.

COLOR. Brown, red, orange, yellow, and even black staining may be attributed to various chemical oxidation states of iron and manganese in raw water and may also be contributed by water mains or the building infrastructure. Green or blue-green staining may be attributable to the corrosion of copper pipes in the infrastructure and may be caused by low pH, galvanic reactions between dissimilar metals, or improper electrical grounding. Milky white or cloudy water is almost invariably caused by dissolved oxygen in the water.

Many of the constituents of water that have the most impact on flavor fall under the EPA's Secondary Standards, which are non-enforceable guidelines for aesthetic considerations. But metallic taste and blue-green coloration may be indicative of more serious concerns. Some health-risks contaminants are invisible and tasteless, can only be detected by testing, and are potentially present in private and unregulated wells. When in doubt, have your water tested.

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