
ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



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Hydrogen Sulfide in Drinking Water

Hydrogen sulfide (H₂S) occurs at objectionable levels in approximately 5-10 percent of water supply wells in New Hampshire. DES believes that bedrock wells experience the problem more than dug wells.

CHEMICAL/BIOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF HYDROGEN SULFIDE

Hydrogen sulfide can be formed naturally as a byproduct of the decomposition of organic material, possibly aided by the presence of sulfur-reducing bacteria. These bacteria are not hazardous to human health. Organic material is often prevalent in swampy areas, and when dissolved in water, breaks down to form many byproducts, including hydrogen sulfide. Hydrogen sulfide can also be produced by chemical reactions of soil and bedrock minerals containing sulfur.

There are many possible byproducts of these chemical reactions. Where there is sufficient oxygen available, these byproducts include water and sulfate; when there is not sufficient oxygen, then different byproducts are produced often having unpleasant taste and odor characteristics. If the water that recharges your bedrock or dug well has little dissolved oxygen, taste or odor problems are possible. A lack of oxygen is called an anaerobic condition.

HOT WATER TANKS: CORROSION PROTECTION RODS

It has also been reported that hydrogen sulfide can be produced within a hot water tank by complex chemical/ biological reactions that are related to the use of anticorrosion rods made of magnesium. These rods are used to prolong the life of the steel liner in a hot water tank. This possible explanation of the origin of hydrogen sulfide can be evaluated by comparing the hot water to the cold water. If there is **no** odor in the cold water, these corrosion protection rods could support the production of the hydrogen sulfide odor. To be very sure there is no odor from the cold water, you may need to agitate and slightly warm the “cold” water in a large flat bottom pan, since at higher temperatures, taste and odor characteristics are much more observable.

HEALTH SIGNIFICANCE

Hydrogen sulfide gas, at the concentrations found in drinking water, is not hazardous to health. Odor identification is imprecise and thus it is difficult to accurately and consistently characterize all the odor factors in water. Other odor characterizations (such as medicine, sweet) may indicate other types of chemical contaminants in the water that may pose a health risk.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Hydrogen sulfide can be easily removed from drinking water. The most common approaches are listed below.

Replacement of Anti-Corrosion Rods: If the odor is only from the hot water system (the odor is not in the cold water taken directly from the well) and if there are magnesium corrosion protection rods, then an easy solution to the hydrogen sulfide may be possible. If the water is not corrosive, these rods may be

removed permanently. Where the water is corrosive, DES suggests substituting aluminum protective rods for the magnesium. Replacement or removal of these rods, however, may void the tank warranty. Check with your hot water tank dealer. See fact sheet WD-DWGB-3-4 “Corrosivity of Water Supplies” at www.des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/pip/factsheets/dwgb/index.htm .

Aeration: In this process large volumes of air are blown through the water. The hydrogen sulfide volatilizes into the air bubbles. The “used” air is then vented outside the home. Aeration is also beneficial in removing radon gas and in raising the water's pH by allowing the “off-gassing” of excess carbon dioxide. The principal disadvantage of this method is possible bacterial growth in the treated water caused by the use of dirty air. Off-gassing of the hydrogen sulfide will be less complete where the pH of the water is high.

Oxidation: In this method an oxidizer (potassium permanganate, chlorine or ozone) is added to the water. The oxidizer chemically reacts with the odor compounds so as to destroy the odor. One relatively low cost variation on this process uses a Venturi nozzle to add small amounts of air to the water. Air contains approximately 20 percent oxygen. The water then proceeds to a detention tank that provides both chemical reaction time and also allows for air release for the unused air.

Adsorption: In this process water is passed through granular activated carbon (GAC). The taste/odor components are taken up and held on the interior surfaces of the carbon particles as the water passes through. If intending to use GAC, also test the water for radionuclides. See fact sheet WD-DWGB-3-11 “Mineral Radioactivity in Drinking Water” at www.des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/pip/factsheets/dwgb/index.htm .

For more information concerning the purchase and layout of water treatment equipment, please refer to the DES fact sheet WD-DWGB-2-5 “Considerations When Purchasing Water Treatment Equipment.”

HAZARDOUS CONTAMINANTS

Occasionally taste or odors can be caused by more serious contamination. This contamination could be from industrial solvents or inappropriate waste disposal. Very expensive laboratory testing is typically required to determine the presence of these contaminants. Whether there is sufficient justification for such testing would require a site specific evaluation focusing on nearby and uphill land uses. For other odor and taste problems, visit the fact sheets webpage at www.des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/pip/factsheets/dwgb/index.htm and scroll to WD-DWGB-3-15 “Taste and Odor in Drinking Water.”

TESTING FOR hydrogen sulfide

The hydrogen sulfide concentration of water can be determined by some private laboratories. For assistance locating a laboratory, please call DES at (603) 271-2998.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact the Drinking Water and Groundwater Bureau and the New Hampshire Water Well Board at (603) 271-2513 or dwgbinfo@des.nh.gov or visit <http://www.des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/dwgb/index.htm>. All of the bureau’s fact sheets are on-line at <http://www.des.nh.gov/organization/commissioner/pip/factsheets/dwgb/index.htm>.

Note: This fact sheet is accurate as of August 2010. Statutory or regulatory changes or the availability of additional information after this date may render this information inaccurate or incomplete.