

Water shortages and your health



During a time of drought or water shortage, one's first health goal is to stay well hydrated. Secondly, sanitation and hygiene become very important to minimise the risk of spreading germs and falling sick.

Limited access to water in rural areas often compromises sanitation, but the same applies to urban areas when water is restricted or even cut off for long periods of time. Staying hydrated is of course a top priority and the use of bottled water for drinking is advised. Unfortunately, sanitation and hand hygiene is sometimes neglected in periods of water scarcity due to clean water not being readily available and bottled water being too expensive to use for anything other than drinking.

Because numerous health conditions are spread and contracted due to hands not being washed with soap and clean, running water, be aware that there are some methods of treating whatever water is available to make it as safe as possible for drinking and hand washing.

- **Boiling.** Boil the water for one to three minutes and then let it cool to kill any viruses, bacteria, or parasites that might be present. If the water is very cloudy, you can filter it through a clean cloth or paper towel.
- **Using water purification tablets.** These can be bought from most camping stores and will contain detailed instructions on how to make sure that the chemicals have worked.
- **Using filters.** These are also available from most camping stores. Be aware, however, that

standard filters will remove most bacteria but not viruses.

- **Using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser** instead of washing your hands if no water is available, but according to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), sanitisers do not eliminate all types of germs and might not remove harmful chemicals.

When should you wash your hands?

It's good practice to keep your hands clean at all times, but the CDC advises people to be particularly conscientious about washing your hands with soap and water under the following circumstances:

- Before, during, and after preparing food.
- Before eating food.
- Before and after caring for someone who is sick.
- Before and after treating a cut or wound.
- After using the toilet.
- After changing diapers or cleaning up a child who has used the toilet.
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
- After touching an animal, animal feed/pet food, or animal waste.
- After touching garbage.