

Problems remain as water is restored in West Virginia

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Problems remain with the water in nine West Virginia counties despite the lifting of the last of the water bans on Saturday. Some 300,000 West Virginians--representing more than 16 percent of the state's population--were told their tap water was not safe for anything but flushing toilets following a chemical leak into the Elk River in Charleston that made its way in to the main water intake for area residents.

According to the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, more than 400 people have been treated at 10 hospitals after being exposed to the chemical, known as crude MCHM, since it entered the water supply on January 9. The vast majority of such cases have occurred since last Thursday, as officials with West Virginia American Water continued its lifting of the water ban.

In addition, the West Virginia Poison Center has reported receiving more than 2,300 calls regarding exposure to the chemical. Symptoms attributed to exposure include skin and eye irritation, upset stomach, vomiting, and diarrhea. Officials warn the chemical's strong odor might also aggravate existing conditions such as allergies, migraines and asthma.

Despite assurances from water company officials that the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) 1-part-per-million guideline represents a safe exposure threshold, county officials report widespread concern and mistrust over the safety of the water supply even after the lifting of the ban.

Some areas, like the Putnam County towns of Buffalo, Frazier's Bottom and Pliny, had the water ban abruptly reinstated Friday after a Buffalo fire hydrant tested above the 1-part-per-million limit. The ban had previously been lifted earlier in the week for the area, thus exposing residents to the tainted water.

Charleston Gazette also reported that residents in the Nitro area, as well as in Sissonville, were issued a boil-water advisory because of the low water levels in storage tanks due to the flushing procedures being carried out.

In the town of Smithers, along the Kanawha River in Fayette County, residents expressed concern over possible water contamination after American Water used a creek in the town to empty their water tanker trucks. The water company confirmed the action but claimed the water dumped was testing at zero parts per million.

Affected area schools are tentatively scheduled to resume classes on Tuesday, following Monday's federal holiday, having been closed for 6 days due to the water crisis. School officials plan to provide hand sanitizer instead of soap and water for sanitation, and offer students bottled water until supplies run out, which is expected by the end of the week.

The decision to reopen schools is contingent first on American Water's confirmation that the water being supplied is safe, and then on approval from the county health department. Health officials have to inspect to ensure each school's complex water system, with water fountains, ice machines, sprinkler systems, and science and athletic facilities, has been properly flushed and the various filters replaced. Delays are expected due to the demand for new filters outstripping current supply.

However, the water company has confirmed that it will not be conducting any tests at individual taps within the schools, a major concern for many parents.

Elementary and high school students in Buffalo returned to school last Friday, only to be sent home upon the abrupt reinstatement of the water ban in the area. The *Charleston Gazette* also reported that parents inside Winfield Elementary School on Friday--where

students were being allowed to use the water fountains--complained that the water was still giving off the licorice-like odor characteristic of MCHM.

While the CDC and water company officials continue to adhere to the 1-part-per-million threshold set by the CDC, director of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department Dr. Rahul Gupta told the *Gazette* that parents “should make their own decisions for themselves and for their children” on whether they wanted to use the water or not.

In addition to the CDC’s recommendation last Wednesday that pregnant women should avoid contact with the water until the chemical is completely undetectable, Dr. Gupta also urged parents to adhere to the advice of pediatrician Dr. Raheel Khan that children under the age of three should avoid drinking the water.

In an effort to address residents’ concerns, West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin hosted a community conference on Saturday where Commissioner for the Bureau of Public Health Dr. Letitia Tierney downplayed residents’ concerns over the water’s safety.

When asked about the hundreds of emergency room visits over the past week and a half, Dr. Tierney suggested it was being driven by the flu and virus season, as well as anxiety. “Many of us haven’t been able to consistently wash our hands with soap and water. While the sanitizer is good for cleaning, it isn’t great for eliminating a virus. Some people are getting these viruses, as many people do every winter.”

As for the reports of burns and rashes, Dr. Tierney claimed that what patients had been complaining of was “not a burn like you and I would think of as a burn...[but] a ‘solar burn,’ which is similar to a sunburn. Basically, it’s red skin.”

“These are topical only. They’re short-lived,” she added. “They are easily treated with over-the-counter products. I would advise anybody who is seeing this type of reaction to speak with your physician. They won’t last. Once things settle down, these symptoms will go away.”

Little remains known about the health risks associated with the chemical crude MCHM, used in the processing of coal, which has contaminated the water supply. In establishing the 1-part-per-million safe threshold, the CDC made use of a 1990 study conducted by the chemical’s manufacturer Eastman

Chemicals involving lab rats. From there the agency applied a standard risk assessment procedure to translate its risks to humans.

However, several scientists remain concerned with the CDC’s methodology and point out that the Eastman study was based on pure MCHM, or 4-methylcyclohexane methanol, which is only a component of the crude MCHM which leaked into the Elk River. Pure MCHM only makes up between 68 and 89 percent of crude MCHM, which includes six other ingredients, according to the material safety data sheet for crude MCHM.

According to biochemist Richard Denison of the Environmental Defense Fund, “If the other components besides MCHM present in the crude mixture are more or less toxic than MCHM, the mixture’s toxicity would differ from that found for the pure material.”



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