Nitrates in Drinking Water

Water wells may be sources of drinking water that have levels of nitrates. Excessive nitrates can cause health problems and they can also be a sign of overall water quality. If you get your drinking water from a well it is recommended that you test your water for nitrates at least once every 3 years. If an infant or a pregnant woman lives in the household, testing is highly recommended.

Nitrate levels at or above the level set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have been known to cause a blood disorder that can be fatal in infants under six months of age, known as “blue-baby” syndrome (methemoglobinemia). Babies with blue-baby syndrome have reduced oxygen-carrying capacity in their blood. Others at risk from excess nitrates in drinking water are:

- Pregnant women
- Individuals with reduced gastric acidity, and
- Individuals with hereditary lack of methemoglobin reductase

The EPA set the Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) of nitrate as nitrogen (NO₃) at 45 mg/L, (or 45 parts per million) for the safety of drinking water.

In Santa Barbara County, as in other regions of the Central Coast, agricultural practices and septic systems have been linked to higher levels of nitrates in drinking water. Although any well can become contaminated by nitrates, shallow, poorly constructed or improperly located wells are more at risk. Higher levels of nitrates may suggest there are other contaminants such as disease-causing organisms, pesticides or chemicals that could cause health problems.

For more information, please go to the Environmental Health Services website at: www.sbcphd.org/ehs and refer to the handout with this press release.

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