



COVID-19: Environmental health risks in WA

Please note that this information is current as at 1 April 2020. The situation is changing rapidly, and future development may alter this advice. It is important that you always look for the most up-to-date information at: www.health.wa.gov.au/coronavirus

Environmental health standards are capable of minimising risks from numerous pathogens including COVID-19. Complying with these existing standards will assist in minimising COVID-19 spread within the WA community.

This information is designed for Environmental Health Officers to assist with answering queries on common environmental health concerns raised by your community.

Key public health messages

COVID-19 is a respiratory virus which spreads primarily through droplets generated when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose.

In all scenarios the promotion of key public health messages should include:

- **stay home if you are unwell:** even if you don't think you could have COVID-19
- **practice good respiratory and hand hygiene:**
 - wash hands regularly with soap and water for 20 - 30 seconds, or use an alcohol-based hand rub if available
 - wash your hands before and after eating
 - don't touch your face
 - cough or sneeze into your elbow and dispose of used tissues immediately
 - use hand hygiene after coughing, sneezing or blowing nose
- **practise social distancing;** refrain from hand shaking, keep 1.5 metres from others where possible

Water quality

COVID-19 is not typically waterborne and water and sanitation systems are not the priority when seeking to monitor and manage the spread of the infection.

Business should continue as usual for the operation and management of drinking water and wastewater in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations.

Drinking water

There is no evidence that drinking water will be affected by the COVID-19 virus or that it is transmitted by piped drinking water supplies.

Conventional drinking water treatment and disinfection methods, including the use of chlorine, are capable of inactivating COVID-19 in water.

The safety of drinking water supplied to Western Australians via reticulated networks is regulated by the Department of Health under a comprehensive regulatory framework that aims to ensure a consistent, reliable supply of safe, good quality drinking water. Conventional drinking water disinfection methods are capable to inactivate COVID-19.

Water is an essential service and drinking water providers are well prepared to manage their response to COVID-19.

Local government EHO's should continue to monitor and take microbiological water samples from private drinking water supplies in their district that have site codes with the Department of Health water quality monitoring program, unless the site has been closed.

PathWest and Chem Centre both remain open for business as usual. EHO's will need to enquire locally about availability and timing of courier and air transport services, particularly if the transport will cross regional boundaries. This will require a clearance-to-work certificate.

Carting of drinking water

Carting of drinking water may continue, where necessary, provided the water carting complies with relevant social distancing and isolation requirements, relevant regional travel restrictions, and the Department of Health's water carting guidelines.

Further information

- [Drinking water – Department of Health](#)
- [Carting drinking water](#)

Recycled water, biosolids and wastewater

There is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted by wastewater systems.

Conventional disinfection of wastewater, designed and operated to meet current standards, guidelines and validation approaches, will be more than adequate to control transmission of COVID-19 via recycled water and wastewater.

There is also no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted by wastewater systems. Hygiene practices, including PPE (such as safety goggles, face shields or masks, gloves) and handwashing to minimise the risk of exposure to pathogens in wastewater as per Department of Health [Guidance for reducing health risk for workers handling sewage, biosolids or recycled water](#) is recommended. No additional measures are currently recommended for COVID-19.

Members of the public should be reminded NOT to flush “flushable” wipes or other non-toilet paper forms of paper down any toilet.

Further information

- [World Health Organization – Water sanitation hygiene and waste management](#)

Air-handling systems [cooling towers, air conditioners]

There is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through air-handling and air-conditioning systems.

Standard Legionella risk management procedures for cooling towers and air conditioning systems must continue to be maintained.

Food safety

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) advise that there is currently no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through food, however it is important that extra care should be taken with hygiene and health.

Food businesses

Food businesses that continue to operate can be advised that the transmission of COVID-19 through food is unlikely if appropriate food safety management practices are in place, and they must continue to comply with the *Food Act 2008* (WA) and the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (the Code) and implement food safety management practices to ensure that food is safe and suitable to eat.

Some of these food safety management practices will also assist to reduce the risk of spread of the virus, such as Standard 3.2.2 - Food safety practices and general requirements, of the Code, including:

- Hand washing and hygiene of food handlers
- [Cleaning and sanitising requirements](#)
- Risk management of self-service food displays (further information can be found on [Department of Health - self-service food displays](#) and [FSANZ – displaying food](#))

Food safety

The public can be advised that the transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19 through food is unlikely and they should continue to practice good food hygiene which will also assist to reduce the risk of spread of the virus.

The [Play it Food Safe campaign](#) provides a range of useful messages and resources to promote to the community. In particular washing hands, washing fruit and vegetables, cleaning and sanitising benchtops and utensils, cooking food thoroughly and correct food storage including preventing cross-contamination and temperature control of food.

Further information

- [FSANZ – Novel coronavirus and food safety](#)

Mosquitoes and other vectors

To date there has been no information nor evidence to suggest that COVID-19 could be transmitted by mosquitoes. Standard mosquito management requirements still apply.

Further information

- [World Health Organisation – myth busters](#)

General hygiene considerations in the community

Public toilets

Public toilets should be supplied with soap to support hand washing. The provision of single use disposable hand towels versus air dryers is at the discretion of the local government. The use of single use disposable hand towels is considered best practice in clinical settings. It is important to ensure public toilets remain open and available to members of the community that rely on using these facilities e.g. transient workers (such as truck drivers) or homeless people.

Drinking fountains and water bubblers managed by the local government

The surfaces around public drinking fountains including the spout and button/lever could pose a transmission risk for COVID-19 and other germs. At this stage, it is not certain how long viruses that cause COVID-19 survive on surfaces.

Users of public drinking fountains should not place their mouth on the spout of a water fountain. Members of the public should be advised to test the water flow and let the water run for a few seconds before drinking the water without putting their mouth or lips on the spout.

It is recommended that local governments that manage public drinking water fountains increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of water bubblers and fountains. At this time, the advice has not extended to placing signs at drinking fountains. If signage is needed, it will be based on a national template.

The closure of public drinking fountains is currently at the discretion of the local government and the risk management measures to implement based on the design and location of the fountains. It is important to ensure a supply of drinking water is available to members of the community that may rely on this as a source e.g. transient workers (such as truck drivers) or homeless people.

Environmental cleaning and disinfection

The [Environmental cleaning for non-healthcare facilities, WA Department of Health](#) provides guidance on routine environmental cleaning.

Waste management

It is important to ensure public rubbish bins are still accessible and emptied regularly to reduce litter and vermin occurring.

Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

PPE is not considered clinical waste and can be disposed of through standard waste disposal methods.

Further information

- [Water, sanitation, hygiene and waste management for COVID-19](#)

Further information

For more information regarding planning recommendations in the context of the current COVID-19 outbreak, please visit:

- **Department of Health – Covid-19 updates** [health.wa.gov.au/coronavirus](https://www.health.wa.gov.au/coronavirus)
- **HealthyWA –** www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Coronavirus
- **Australian Department of Health** www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert