

What are Some Naturally Occurring Sources of Pollution?

Microorganisms: Bacteria, viruses, parasites and other microorganisms are sometimes found in water. Shallow wells — those with water close to ground level — are at most risk. Runoff, or water flowing over the land surface, may pick up these pollutants from wildlife and soils. This is often the case after flooding. Some of these organisms can cause a variety of illnesses. Symptoms include nausea and diarrhea. These can occur shortly after drinking contaminated water. The effects could be short-term yet severe (similar to food poisoning) or might recur frequently or develop slowly over a long time.

Radionuclides: Radionuclides are radioactive elements such as uranium and radium. They may be present in underlying rock and ground water. Radon — a gas that is a natural product of the breakdown of uranium in the soil — can also pose a threat. Radon is most dangerous when inhaled and contributes to lung cancer. Although soil is the primary source, using household water containing Radon contributes to elevated indoor Radon levels. Radon is less dangerous when consumed in water, but remains a risk to health.

Nitrates and Nitrites: Although high nitrate levels are usually due to human activities (see below), they may be found naturally in ground water. They come from the breakdown of nitrogen compounds in the soil. Flowing ground water picks them up from the soil. Drinking large amounts

of nitrates and nitrites is particularly threatening to infants (for example, when mixed in formula).

Heavy Metals: Underground rocks and soils may contain arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead, and selenium. However, these contaminants are not often found in household wells at dangerous levels from natural sources.

Fluoride: Fluoride is helpful in dental health, so many water systems add small amounts to drinking water. However, excessive consumption of naturally occurring fluoride can damage bone tissue. High levels of fluoride occur naturally in some areas. It may discolor teeth, but this is not a health risk.

What Human Activities Can Pollute Ground water?

Bacteria and Nitrates: These pollutants are found in human and animal wastes. Septic tanks can cause bacterial and nitrate pollution. So can large numbers of farm animals. Both septic systems and animal manures must be carefully managed to prevent pollution. Sanitary landfills and garbage dumps are also sources. Children and some adults are at extra risk when exposed to water-born bacteria. These include the elderly and people whose immune systems are weak due to AIDS or treatments for cancer. Fertilizers can add to nitrate problems. Nitrates cause a health threat in very young infants called “blue baby” syndrome. This condition disrupts oxygen flow in the blood.