Nitrates/ Nitrites

What are Nitrates/ Nitrites and how are they used?

Nitrates and nitrites are nitrogen-oxygen chemical units, which combine with various organic and inorganic compounds. Once taken into the body, nitrates are converted into nitrites. The greatest use of nitrates is as a fertilizer.

Why are Nitrates/ Nitrites being regulated?

In 1974, Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act. This law requires EPA to determine safe levels of chemicals in drinking water, which do or may cause health problems. These non-enforceable levels, based solely on possible health risks and exposure, are called Maximum Contaminant Level Goals.

The MCLG for nitrates has been set at 10 parts per million (ppm), and for nitrites at 1 ppm, because EPA believes this level of protection would not cause any of the potential health problems described below.

Based on this MCLG, EPA has set an enforceable standard called a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL). MCLs are set as close to the MCLGs as possible, considering the ability of public water systems to detect and remove contaminants using suitable treatment technologies.

The MCL for nitrates has been set at 10 ppm, and for nitrites at 1 ppm, because EPA believes, given present technology and resources, this is the lowest level to which water systems can reasonably be required to remove this contaminant should it occur in drinking water.

These drinking water standards and the regulations for ensuring these standards are met, are called National Primary Drinking Water Regulations. All public water supplies must abide by these regulations.

What are the health effects?

Short-term: Excessive levels of nitrate in drinking water have caused serious illness and sometimes death. The serious illness in infants is due to the conversion of nitrate to nitrite by the body, which can interfere with the oxygen-carrying capacity of the child’s blood. This can be an acute condition in which health deteriorates rapidly over a period of days. Symptoms include shortness of breath and blueness of the skin.

Long-term: Nitrates and nitrites have the potential to cause the following effects from a lifetime exposure at levels above the MCL: diuresis, increased starchy deposits and hemorrhaging of the spleen.

How much Nitrates/ Nitrites are produced and released to the Environment?
Most nitrogenous materials in natural waters tend to be converted to nitrate, so all sources of combined nitrogen, particularly organic nitrogen and ammonia, should be considered as potential nitrate sources. Primary sources of organic nitrates include human sewage and livestock manure, especially from feedlots.

The primary inorganic nitrates that may contaminate drinking water are potassium nitrate and ammonium nitrate both of which are widely used as fertilizers.

According to the Toxics Release Inventory, releases to water and land totaled over 112 million pounds from 1991 through 1993. The largest releases of inorganic nitrates occurred in Georgia and California.

What happens to Nitrates/ Nitrites when they are released to the environment?

Since they are very soluble and do not bind to soils, nitrates have a high potential to migrate to ground water. Because they do not evaporate, nitrates/nitrites are likely to remain in water until consumed by plants or other organisms.

How will Nitrates/ Nitrites be detected in and removed from my drinking water?

The regulation for nitrates/nitrites became effective in 1992. Between 1993 and 1995, EPA required your water supplier to collect water samples at least once a year and analyze them to find out if nitrates/nitrites are present above 50 percent of their MCLs. If it is present above this level, the system must continue to monitor this contaminant every 3 months.

If contaminant levels are found to be consistently above their MCLs, your water supplier must take steps to reduce the amount of nitrates/nitrites so that they are consistently below that level. EPA has approved the following treatment methods for removing nitrates/nitrites: Ion exchange, Reverse Osmosis, Electrodialysis.

How will I know if Nitrates/ Nitrites is in my drinking water?

If the levels of nitrates/nitrites exceed their MCLs, the system must notify the public via newspapers, radio, TV and other means. Additional actions, such as providing alternative drinking water supplies, may be required to prevent serious risks to public health.

Drinking Water Standards( ppm): MCLG MCL

Nitrate: 10 ppm (MCLG/MCL)
Nitrite: 1ppm (MCLG/MCL)

This factsheet was adapted from U.S. EPA.
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