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Preparing Drinking Water for Hurricane Season

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It's that time of year again where we turn our eyes towards the Atlantic Ocean watching for hurricanes. At this time, we need to begin storing hurricane supplies such as nonperishable food, batteries, and water. Preparing a water supply is simple, but it does take a little bit of planning and effort to ensure you have enough of this essential resource during a time of need.

The first step is to determine how much water to store. A good rule of thumb is to store enough clean water to allow each person in the household to use one to 1.5 gallons per day. This amount should be increased if there are children, sick people, nursing mothers, and/or pets in the household. Store enough water for at least three days. For example, a four-person household requiring 1.5 gallons per day for three days should store 18 gallons (four people x 1.5 gallons x three days).

Once you know how much to store, you'll need to prepare the storage containers. Only use plastic or glass containers that have held food. Milk containers are not recommended as a storage container because they can be difficult to clean and bacteria can grow quickly in them. Do not use containers that have held chemicals such as bleach and cleaning supplies because residue can remain in the container even after cleaning.

The containers need to be sanitized before collecting water by following these steps: first, wash the inside and outside of each container with soap and hot water; then, disinfect the inside of the containers with a solution of one teaspoon of non-scented household bleach per quart of water, and rinse thoroughly with plain clean water. Don't forget about the caps when cleaning the containers.

Now it is time to fill up the containers. If your drinking water is from a public supply, you don't need to treat the water to disinfect it unless there is a "boil order." However, if the water you are storing comes from a private well, spring, or other untested source, purify it before storage to kill bacteria by bringing the water to a rolling boil and boiling it continuously for three to four minutes.

Once you have an adequate water supply, label the containers "Drinking Water" with the date of storage. Since direct light and heat can damage containers and result in leaks, place the containers in a cool, dark, and dry place. A good place to store plastic containers is in the freezer because this method has the added benefit of helping to keep frozen food cold for a longer time if power is out for an extended period. Replace the water every six to 12 months to ensure best taste.

After all of that work to store water safely, don't allow it to become contaminated during use. Open a container just before use and then refrigerate it if power is available. This will help minimize exposure to bacteria. If no refrigeration is available, keep the container up high, away from children and pets. Use water from opened containers within one to two days if possible.

When a hurricane warning is issued, there is a limited amount of time to do a lot of things. By storing an adequate water supply in advance of adverse weather, you are ensuring that you and your family will have enough water until things get back to normal. For more information, please contact your local University of Florida County Extension Service.