

Warning on freshwater shortages foreseeable impact on health¹

Press release from the French National Academy of Medicine

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Water is a resource under threat, and scientific forecasts regarding climate change suggest that such phenomena will become more pronounced in the future (1). These critical developments pose major challenges for public health, as legislation imposes an obligation to always ensure a clean and safe water supply (2).

First, water shortages can lead to difficulties with personal hygiene, as well as the risk of dehydration, particularly during periods of extreme heat, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by local authorities and inter-municipal bodies in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable members of the population (3).

Low water levels in rivers, reservoirs and groundwater tables increase concentrations of chemical pollution and biological contaminants, making water treatment processes more complex. Pumping water from private wells, the safety of which is unknown, and the use of non-potable water heighten the risks of diseases linked to contamination. Furthermore, heat promotes the growth of *Legionella* bacteria in water systems and aerosols (showers, misters), thereby increasing the risk of exposure. Whether in storage or in rivers, cyanobacterial blooms can produce toxins (4).

Pressure drops and water cuts weaken distribution networks, making it easier for contaminants to enter the system when the water supply is restored, and in particular jeopardizing the continuity of supply to healthcare and social care facilities.

In view of the serious public health challenges associated with reduced water availability, the French National Academy of Medicine:

Recalls that:

- Water is a key and priority factor in protecting public health
- The protection of public health explicitly requires the continuous supply of - sufficient quantities of water that meets regulatory quality standards;
- Shortages of fresh water affect the balance of ecosystems, creating a link with public health under the 'One Health' concept (cyanobacterial toxins, chemical pollution, microbial ecology, etc.);

Recommends:

- That health considerations must be considered in all management decisions concerning surface and groundwater water bodies;
- A policy strategy to be implemented at national, regional and local levels to prevent risks associated with freshwater shortages and to protect public health, including in adverse

¹ Press Release from the Academy's Rapid Communication Platform

conditions, with particular attention paid to the most vulnerable groups and to health and social care facilities

- The practice of essential collaboration between stakeholders to ensure that distribution is fair and always based on need
- The introduction of an official, independent certification scheme guaranteeing the effectiveness and safety of commercially available domestic water treatment systems, and support for the population, particularly the most vulnerable, to prevent health risks associated with the use of non-potable water;
- Strengthening information and communication efforts aimed at the general public and healthcare professionals (particularly general practitioners) on how to respond during periods of water restrictions.

Références :

- (1) Académie des technologies. (2023) Apports des technologies en réponse aux besoins en eau douce en France dans le contexte du changement climatique. <https://www.academie-technologies.fr/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Rapport-AT-Apport-technologies-eau-douce-Juin-2023.pdf>
- (2) Code de la santé publique, Articles L. 1321-1 and subsequent pages.
- (3) Code de la santé publique, Article L. 1321-1 B concerning access to water for people in vulnerable situations.
- (4) Anses (2020) Avis et rapport de l'Anses relatif à l'actualisation de l'évaluation des risques liés à la présence de cyanobactéries et leurs toxines dans les eaux destinées à l'alimentation, les eaux de loisirs et les eaux destinées aux activités de pêche professionnelle et de loisir. <https://www.anses.fr/system/files/ERCA2015SA0207Ra.pdf>