# **Bad Water: 'Third World' conditions on First Nations in Canada**

Two-thirds of all First Nation communities in Canada have been under at least one drinking water advisory at some time in the last decade, a CBC News investigation has revealed. The numbers show that 400 out of 618 First Nations in the country had some kind of water problem between 2004 and 2014.

The longest running water advisory is in the Neskantaga First Nation in Ontario, where residents have been boiling their water for 20 years.

Nazko First Nation, Alexis Creek First Nation and Lake Babine, all in British Columbia, are next on the list with water problems spanning 16 years.

Between 2004 and 2014, 93 per cent of all First Nations in Saskatchewan and New Brunswick reported at least one water advisory in their communities. Alberta is close behind at 87 per cent.

The lowest provincial rate is 51 per cent in Manitoba.

A variety of factors can trigger a water advisory, ranging from bad pipe connections, low pressure, improper filtration and disinfection right up to contamination with bacteria. The most common kind of advisory, by far, is a boil water advisory.

"It's absolutely outrageous," said Cindy Blackstock, director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and associate professor at the University of Alberta. "That very absolute necessity of life is being denied to a whole group of people in this country as wealthy as ours."

"You end up with a real sense of despair and stress in these communities," she added, "and it could be alleviated by one simple promise...provide everyone a good glass of water, and stop discriminating in service provision."

On any given day, official water advisories on First Nation communities can number 150 or more. Even though experts can't pin down the exact reason, that number has steadily climbed over the last decade.

"I was very surprised to see the number of First Nations within each province that were on boil water advisories," said Lalita Bharadwaj, associate professor in the University of Saskatchewan's School of Public Health.

Bharadwaj said governments have spent about $2 billion on the issue between 2001 and 2013, but the problems are as severe as ever. She said a more targeted approach is needed, along with better communication between government and First Nations.

"The percentages across the country are extremely high," she said. "That says to me that the situation is a perennial issue, that not enough attention has been paid."

"So 10 years ago, we were at 30 per cent of the water treatment systems in First Nations posed a high risk to safe drinking water, and today we have the same."

Chronic government underfunding of water systems is to blame for the lack of progress, said Emma Lui of the Council of Canadians. She said a national assessment commissioned by the federal government found $470 million was needed per year over 10 years.

"Giving $165 million year after year is simply not enough," said Lui.

**'Appalling conditions,' says Nazko chief**

In the interior of B.C., the Nazko First Nation has been under a water advisory for 16 years, a situation the chief calls unacceptable.

"It's very upsetting. We live in Canada but on reserve it feels like Third World conditions," said Nazko Chief Stuart Alec. "Drinking, bathing — it's pretty appalling these conditions exist in this country."

Even though $3.5 million went into fixing the system a couple of years ago, the water advisory persists. Alec blames the way the project was executed for its failure.

"They took the easy route. They sent money but did not put someone on the ground," he said.

"They filtered out money so it would look like they were dealing with the issue, but they needed a project manager on the ground to oversee the project and report to the band and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. None of that happened."

Alec said the water system has been plagued with problems from the beginning, ranging from bad connections to lack of training.

## **Part-time water tech at Pinaymootang**

In Manitoba, Pinaymootang First Nation has been under a water advisory for the last 859 days — an order that affects just the arena and gas bar. But residents distrust the quality of the tap water in their own homes so much that most pick up bottles of drinking water from the treatment plant.

"If this was in a town or municipality somewhere else, the news would be all over this," said Derrick Gould, an outgoing band councillor from Pinaymootang​.

Gould described years of brown baths, bottled water and boiling kettles when the treated water runs out. He said the harsh chlorine that's used to kill bacteria has also ruined people's laundry.

"I know that our water plant facility is too small for the size of our community," said Gwen Traverse, the First Nation's health director.

The budget to run the water treatment plant is small, too. One part-time employee who is paid $15,000 a year is taking care of the water in the community of 1,200 people. But it takes more than part-time hours to get the job done.

"She's doing it on her own time and dime," said Traverse. "I'm glad that she's doing it for her own community, but it makes me feel bad."

A drinking water advisory can affect as little as one building. It does not always represent a problem with the entire water system in the community, according to the Health Canada website.

Health Canada declined an interview request and said it had no comment on the data but a spokesperson said the department "knows about the problem that is both serious and complex".



**Impacts on Health and Hygiene**

Many households surveyed by Human Rights Watch reported problems related to skin infections, eczema, psoriasis, or other skin problems that they thought either were related to or exacerbated by the water conditions in their home. Many also reported changing hygiene habits, including limiting baths or showers for children, because of concerns about water quality. Limiting baths can have a direct impact on hygiene, and therefore on health.

Information about health and hygiene risks is inconsistently available for First Nations communities, resulting in some households unknowingly using water that authorities have declared unsafe. The Human Rights Watch survey found that members of many households felt they did not have sufficient information about the quality of their water supply or about alternatives when their water was declared at risk. Fifty-seven of the 99 households surveyed reported that they did not think that, or know whether, the quality of their water was sufficient for bathing. For others, despite knowing that the authorities had declared their tap water was not safe to drink, the inconvenience of living under a drinking water advisory—for years, if not decades—means that they sometimes drink unsafe water without boiling or treating it.[[55]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn55)

When a drinking water advisory is issued for a community system, First Nations leaders, Health Canada, and INAC work together to respond and provide a limited amount of safe drinking water to households. This may be through providing 20-liter bottles of water, or through community treated water collection points.

While this focus on drinking water alternatives is insufficient, it has helped many families secure at least a minimal amount of safe drinking water. But there is no comparable response for providing sufficient alternative water for hygiene. Many First Nations residents, especially caregivers of children, told Human Rights Watch that their loved ones suffered from skin conditions they believe resulted from bathing in contaminated water, or from being unable to bathe or wash hands regularly. The community health director in Grassy Narrows First Nation told Human Rights Watch, “the lack of clean water translates into poor hygiene.”[[56]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn56)

A 2013 study found a high rate of cases of infection from community-associated methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus areaus* (CA-MRSA)—a major cause of skin and soft tissue infections among other diseases—in northwest Ontario, home to 28,000 indigenous individuals on remote reserves.[[57]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn57) The study found an increase in cases of infection attended by the main regional referral health center between 2008 and 2013. CA-MRSA often presents as a skin infection and is associated with poor hygiene, such as a lack of hand washing.[[58]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn58) The study suggested that the increase may be due to the absence of running water.[[59]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn59)

At least one household in the Human Rights Watch survey had a confirmed case of MRSA. Debora C., from Grassy Narrows, said her 9-year-old son was diagnosed with MRSA in 2015:

I kept taking him to the clinic and they kept saying it was eczema. His belly and buttocks got really red, oozy and it spread. The ointment [they gave me] didn’t work. I took him again. His blood was tested. The practitioner said it was MRSA.… I sponge him with bottled water from the jugs, clean him that way.... My son has scarring now from where the rash broke out. [It’s] not inflamed now… But he will have an inflammation once in a while, it won't go away [totally] because of the water, but now we know how to control [the infection]. [[60]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn60)

Like many other families, Debora C. rations her children’s baths. “My kids miss one day, bathe every two days,” she said. She worries about letting them bathe any more often, and does not have enough bottled water for baths with water she knows is safe. She explained, “If my son has a cut, [it] will turn into a rash and I have to take him to the clinic to take antibiotics. So, my son misses a lot of school.”[[61]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn61)

Walter S., a father of four children, three under the age of three, reported that members of his family were diagnosed with scabies last year. He believes that the sores were related to the water, because the medicine his family received from the health center had not worked.[[62]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn62) “It’s hard to tell the one-year-old and nine-month-old not to scratch. It’s hard to be the bad guy about it all.… My oldest hides in the bathroom to itch,” he said. [[63]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn63) He told Human Rights Watch that the situation is very hard on him as a parent.[[64]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn64) In the past, the community’s trauma team helped deliver water to households that needed extra help, andWalter said that “really helped out.” But he said that stopped when the funding was cut in 2015.[[65]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn65)

Community water is often treated with chlorine. A significant number of households reported to Human Rights Watch that they believed the water they used for hygiene made them or their children itch, and some suspected this was due to the chlorine.[[66]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn66) While chlorine, when used correctly, can safely disinfect water, the World Health Organization recognizes that exposure to chlorine and hypochlorite is associated with episodes of dermatitis.[[67]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn67)

Other respondents complained about health problems they believe stemmed from the water they used for hygiene, though they did not know whether contaminants, treatment chemicals, or other factors were the cause. “We have scabs and our hair is falling out,” reported one elder living in a large household in Neskantaga First Nation. “The children [in the house] have scabs if they take baths too frequently.”[[68]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn68) A grandfather in Neskantaga First Nation reported, “If [my] granddaughter bathes too frequently, her color changes and she gets a rash.”[[69]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn69) A mother of an 11-month-old baby reported similar problems:

When [my son] was a newborn, I would use water from the [reverse osmosis dispenser], but it was hard to bathe him every day. So I use the tap water. When he was 4 months old, his face got swollen. [I was told] he has eczema. I want to bathe him every day, but it has to be every two to three days. [When we travel to] Thunder Bay, his skin isn’t like this [when I bathe him in the water there].[[70]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn70)

A mother of three young children in Grassy Narrows First Nation reported limiting their bath time, and was concerned about her daughter’s rough skin: “My daughter, her skin, is almost like eczema. I keep taking her to the clinic, they give her cream, it goes away, and [then it] comes back up.”[[71]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn71)

Households in Shoal Lake 40 First Nation reported similar problems, which they believed to be caused by the water. For example, Tricia M. reported, “[Our household] doesn’t have perfect skin—dryness, rashes, eczema—from directly bathing in this stuff.”[[72]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn72) Linda R., a mother in Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, said her foster son had a recurring rash, and she kept taking him to the doctor. “On the fourth or fifth time, I went in [the doctor] asked me ‘do you have treated water in your community?’ I said, ‘no we don’t.’ ‘Well, there’s your problem,’ he said.”[[73]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn73) She said her son occasionally asks if they can rent a hotel room off the reserve so he can take a proper bath.

A man in Rankin reserve of Batchewana First Nation said his foster children bathe in dirty well water, and have skin problems. “Our foster kids have issues. There have been some issues—skin issues, red, dried out, rashes,” he said.[[74]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn74) Another Batchewana resident lamented similar problems. “The water stinks, it stains things,” she said. “My child has eczema, and the water irritates it.”[[75]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn75) A household member in the Goulais reserve of Batchewana First Nation with uranium contamination in her well reported, “Access to bathing is a problem. We’ve had hair loss…. The water burns, and our hair is thinner. [The water] stinks, it’s not healthy… I would love to have a bath again.”[[76]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn76)

Some families choose to treat their own bath water with household bleach. One woman who cares for foster children in Shoal Lake 40 First Nation started doing so after one of the girls was showering with lake water and had an infection on her arm for months.[[77]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn77) A mother of six living in Six Nations of the Grand River also reported using bleach to treat her well water after a doctor told her that her children’s dry skin was related to their water.[[78]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn78)“Bleach is our answer to everything when we have water problems here. That's what everyone says, just put bleach in it,” she said.[[79]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn79)

Skin infection outbreaks raise alarm bells about water risks, but communities sometimes lack information or distrust the information provided by the government. For example, in March 2016 news spread that 16 babies and children had oozing and scabby skin lesions in the northern Ontario reserve of Kashechewan First Nation.[[80]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn80) This same community was evacuated in 2005 due to *E. coli* contamination in its water.[[81]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn81) The community’s last boil water advisory was issued in November and revoked in December 2015.[[82]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn82) After the March 2016 public outcry, the federal Minister of Health stated that the lesions were not a result of poor water quality, and recent tests found that water there met safety standards.[[83]](https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis#_ftn83)However, community members continued to voice concern about water quality, and demanded more information.

**Bad Water Questions**

1. **How prevalent are drinking water advisories in First Nations reserves?  What types of issues cause advisories?**
2. **Which type of health advisory is most common?  Why would this be a health issue?**
3. **Describe the funding given by the federal government, is this enough? Explain**
4. **What difficulties do the Nazco chief give for the failure of attempts to solve this issue?**
5. **Explain the issues in the community of Pinaymootang?**
6. **What is the range for time spent under a water advisory?  What is the source for this date?  Is it reliable? Explain.**
7. **What evidence suggests that residents do not have enough information about water safety?**
8. **What is CA-MRSA?  How is it related to the water crisis?**
9. **Using evidence from this article, and your own experience, do you believe discrimination plays a role in this crisis?  Explain**
10. **Write a one page letter to the Federal government arguing why something needs to be done to address water issues on First Nation reserves.  Use data from the reports and be sure to source where this data come from.  Ex.  According to Health Canada ...**

[**www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis**](http://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis)

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