Residents of our community are still reeling over the current E. coli outbreak in Walkerton. The outbreak serves as a harsh reminder of the importance of careful monitoring of drinking water.

While operators of municipal water facilities all over the province and beyond are reviewing their testing and reporting systems to ensure the water supplied by these plants is safe for drinking, there are also thousands of families who rely on private well water for their drinking water. If you get your water from a private well, you need to be equally as vigilant in making sure the water is safe for drinking.

In fact, we know that local residents and people across the province are taking this issue seriously because testing labs everywhere have been deluged. The London Public Health lab recently set out 13,000 water bottles to agencies in its jurisdiction. They tested 1,400 water samples on Friday May 26 alone. That’s the number they would normally test over a two month period.

While it is important to test your water – we recommend twice a year – it is also important to be responsible in requesting a water sample. Our health inspectors are here to help interpret the results and explain how to check your septic system and well for structural weaknesses that could become a pathway for bacteria. The problem, of course, is that our staff is extremely busy with the current crisis. If you are worried about your drinking water, boil it for five minutes.

In the meantime, I am offering the following information to help to keep your well water healthy.

Well water quality can change over time, especially during rainy periods. Rain can wash bacteria and chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers across the ground surface and into private wells. Bacteria can also come from damaged or poorly maintained septic systems.

Wells are especially susceptible to contaminated ground water if they are shallow, built in low areas, or not sealed properly. If the well cap has become loose the well may no longer be watertight. You should also be wary of openings in other areas of the well wall or at joints where surface water and debris could work its way through.
Keep wells in good shape, with no cracks or loose covers that can let bacteria in. Sand points or shallow wells in sandy soils can be riskier because sand carries chemicals and bacteria through the ground faster than other soil types do.

Take care of your septic system. Be sure you don’t overload it, or the contents can pool on the ground surface and flow into the well. Septic tanks should be pumped out when needed, usually every three to five years.

One of the problems with newly contaminated well water is that it isn’t easy to detect because there may be no change in taste, smell or colour. Typical symptoms of illness related to drinking water contaminated with bacteria, parasites or viruses include diarrhea, nausea and intestinal upset.

For more information on ways to protect your health and your water supply, visit our web site at www.publichealthgreybruce.on.ca.