

English fishing village told to boil water after a parasite outbreak sickens over 45 people

May 17 2024, by Brian Melley



A general view of Brixham Harbour, in Brixham, Devon, Friday May 17, 2024. Around 16,000 homes and businesses in the Brixham area of Devon were told to boil water after cryptosporidium, a microscopic parasite that causes diarrhea, was found in the water. At least 46 cases of cryptosporidiosis have been confirmed and more than 100 other people have reported similar symptoms, the U.K. Health Security Agency said. Cases can last more than two weeks. Credit: Piers Mucklejohn/PA via AP

A scenic fishing village in southwestern England was under instructions to boil its tap water for a third day on Friday after a parasite sickened more than 45 people in the latest example of Britain's troubled water system.

Around 16,000 homes and businesses in the Brixham area of Devon were told to boil water after cryptosporidium, a microscopic parasite that causes diarrhea, was found in the water. At least 46 cases of cryptosporidiosis have been confirmed and more than 100 other people have reported similar symptoms, the U.K. Health Security Agency said. Symptoms can last more than two weeks.

Sally Dart, who runs a housewares shop near Brixham Harbor, said people in town first began feeling ill two weeks ago during a pirate festival.

"No one was checking the quality of the water and we've all got sick and it's stupid," she said.

South West Water's Chief Executive Susan Davy apologized for the outbreak and said technicians were working around the clock to identify and fix the problem that may have come from a pipe in a cattle pasture.

"I am truly sorry for the disruption and wider anxiety this has caused," Davy said. "I know on this occasion we have fallen significantly short of what you expect of us."

The crisis is unrelated to Britain's larger ongoing water woes but emblematic of an aging system in distress.



Sally Dart, who runs Flotsam 50 near Brixham Harbour, a shop that sells artwork, furniture, and flowers poses in Brixham, Friday May 17, 2024. Around 16,000 homes and businesses in the Brixham area of Devon were told to boil water after cryptosporidium, a microscopic parasite that causes diarrhea, was found in the water. Sally Dart, who runs a housewares shop near Brixham Harbor, said people in town first began feeling ill two weeks ago during a pirate festival. "No one was checking the quality of the water and we've all got sick and it's stupid," she said. Credit: Piers Mucklejohn/PA via AP

Water companies have been under fire for more than a year to stop frequent sewage overflows into rivers and oceans that have literally caused a stink, sickened swimmers, polluted fishing streams and led to an outcry from the public to clean up their act.

An environmental group this week reported that 70,000 sewage releases

spilled for a total of 400,000 hours along England's coast last year. More than a quarter were within two miles (3.2 kilometers) of a swimming spot, Friends of the Earth said in its analysis of government data.

Clean water advocates have blamed the problems on Britain's privatization of the water system in 1989. They say that companies have put shareholders ahead of customers and not spent enough to update outdated plumbing systems.

Thames Water, the largest of the companies, is on the brink of insolvency and its leaders have said it faces the the risk of being nationalized after shareholders refused to inject more cash.

Earlier this week, in another sign of problems, millions of gallons of raw sewage were pumped into England's largest lake. After a fault caused pumps to fail, backup systems then pumped human waste into Lake Windermere, a UNESCO World Heritage site, for 10 hours, the BBC reported.

The cryptosporidiosis outbreak is hardly the first time South West Water has encountered problems, according to authorities.

The company is facing charges in Plymouth Magistrates' Court alleging 30 offenses for illegal water discharges or breaches of environmental permits between 2015 and 2021, the Environment Agency said.



People collect bottled water at Broadsands Car Park in Paignton, England, Friday May 17, 2024. Around 16,000 households and businesses in the Brixham area of Devon have been told not to use their tap water for drinking without boiling and cooling it first, following the discovery of small traces of a parasite in the local water network. Credit: Ben Birchall/PA via AP

The recent outbreak appears to come from a damaged air valve in a pipe that runs through a field where cows graze that is close to a reservoir, said Laura Flowerdew, a spokesperson for South West.

With word out about the outbreak, Dart said her business is down by about a third and other merchants complained about a loss of income as warmer weather arrives and a holiday weekend is just a week away.

"I would say it's quiet and it shouldn't be at this time of year," Dart said.

A primary school was forced to close Thursday because it didn't have clean drinking water. The water company is providing free bottled water at three locations and has increased compensation to customers from 15 pounds (\$19) to 115 (\$145).

Paul Hunter, a professor in medicine at the University of East Anglia, said it's likely more people will become ill with cryptosporidiosis in coming days or weeks because of a lag in the incubation period.

"Even if they have stopped all new infections by now, you would expect to see further cases for at least 10 days to two weeks," he told the BBC.

Anthony Mangnall, a Conservative member of Parliament from the area, said residents are likely to have to boil water for another week. He said he was concerned with the water company's response to the outbreak and vowed to hold it accountable.

"They have been slow to act and communication with customers has been very poor," Mangnall said. "This has certainly undermined trust in our water network."

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Citation: English fishing village told to boil water after a parasite outbreak sickens over 45 people (2024, May 17) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-english-fishing-village-told-outbreak.html>

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