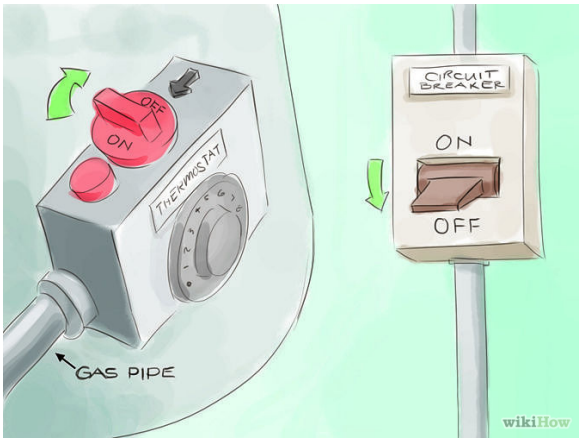
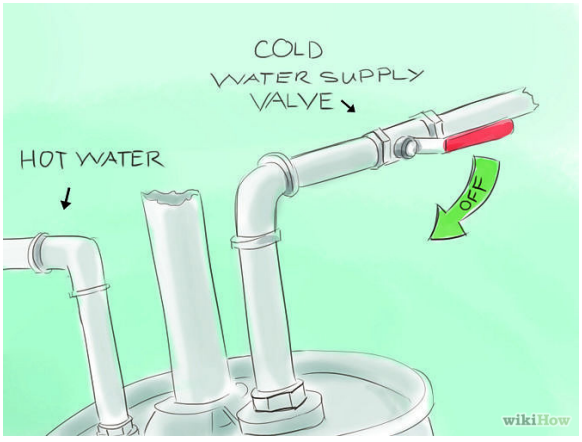
How to Get Emergency Drinking Water from a Water Heater

A typical home water heater can provide between 30 and 60 gallons of clean drinking water during a disaster. Disaster and power outages may prevent you from having many things, but clean drinking water should not be one of them. To reclaim clean drinking water from your water heater, this is what you should do.

1. 

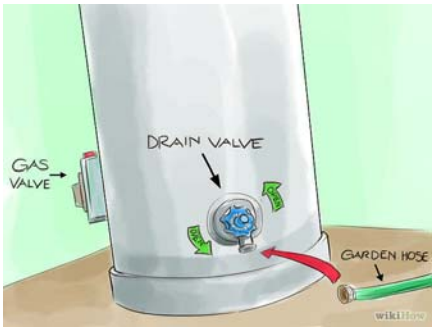
1. **Turn off the electricity or gas to the water heater.** Turn off the circuit breaker for electric water heaters or close the gas valve for natural gas and propane types. If the power is still on when the tank is empty, your tank will almost certainly sustain significant damage. Most electric water heaters in residential applications are 208/240 volts, and supplied by a double-pole circuit breaker or two fuses rated at 30 amps.

- Some gas valves have a thermostatic control knob facing forward. The "Off - Pilot - On" gas supply knob is located on the top, between the red interlock button the black "push-button" igniter. Simply rotate the top knob from the "On" to the "Off" position to stop the flow of gas to the burner.
- Some electric-reliant heaters have double-pole 30 amp circuit breakers. Switch the circuit breaker from the "On" position to the "Off." Once off, there is no danger of damaging the heating elements.

2. 

2. **Preserve the cleanliness of the water in the tank by closing the supply valve to the tank.** When water service is restored, the water department will be pumping water that could be contaminated. This will be fine to use for flushing toilets and for cooking, but not for drinking.

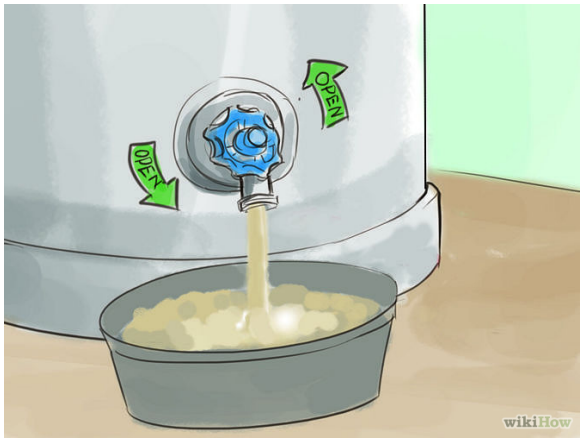
- Determine whether you're dealing with a ball valve or a gate valve. Unlike a traditional gate valve's handle, which needs to be turned completely several times in order to shut off, a ball valve handle is rotated just a 1/4 turn between full on and off positions.
- If the water heater is older, traditional gate valves were installed instead, bear in mind that the color of the handle does not guarantee an association with the temperature of the water in the pipe.

3. 

3. **Find the valve at the bottom of the tank for draining.** This is where your clean drinking water will come from. Many water heater valves have a connector for hooking up a garden hose to the drain valve. A short 3 foot (0.9 m) length of garden hose will make the collection of the water easier. A washing machine's supply hose is the perfect length and is available in many homes. Connect the hose and open the valve briefly to flush any debris that may have collected in the valve. Make sure the drain, hose, and container are clean before using them.

- Threads are usually provided to connect an ordinary garden hose (or washer supply hose). Some gate valves do not have a traditional handle, but rather a slot at the end of the stem where a handle would normally attach. The slot allows for operation with a screwdriver, or coin. Work this valve gently, as these valves are seldom used more than once or twice per year under normal service conditions, and could be damaged if forced.

4. **Turn on the hot water from any tap in the house.** In order for water to be drained from the tank, you must allow air to get into it. This is easy to do by opening any hot water tap in the building such as the kitchen or bathroom sink. When either faucet is open, a sucking sound may be heard whenever water is drawn from the water heater's drain valve, and is normal.



5. **Remove any sediment that has collected at the bottom of the water heater.** Water heaters are notorious for trapping sediments. The heavier-than-water sediment sinks and collects at the bottom of the tank because hot water is drawn from the top of the tank, rather than the bottom. If you have sediment in the drinking water let it stand for a period of time to let it settle to the bottom of container.

- Typical mineral sediment that has settled in the hot water is usually harmless, but if your heater has an aluminum anode, there may be a lot of jelly-like aluminum corrosion byproduct on the tank bottom.
- Many people mistakenly believe that the tank is made of glass (or another inert substance). It is not. The inside of the tank will likely be *lined* with glass to prevent corrosion, since corrosion is the leading cause of water heater failure. There is no danger cooking or consuming water that has been contained in a water heater.