

# **Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) – Overview**

**Author Unknown**

Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD) refers to the amount of oxygen that would be consumed if all the organics in one liter of water were oxidized by bacteria and protozoa (ReVelle and ReVelle, 1988).

The first step in measuring BOD is to obtain equal volumes of water from the area to be tested and dilute each specimen with a known volume of distilled water which has been thoroughly shaken to insure oxygen saturation.

After this, an oxygen meter is used to determine the concentration of oxygen within one of the vials. The remaining vial is then sealed and placed in darkness and tested five days later. BOD is then determined by subtracting the second meter reading from the first.

The range of possible readings can vary considerably: water from an exceptionally clear lake might show a BOD of less than 2 ml/L of water. Raw sewage may give readings in the hundreds and food processing wastes may be in the thousands.

## **Background Information**

Microorganisms such as bacteria are responsible for decomposing organic waste. When organic matter such as dead plants, leaves, grass clippings, manure, sewage, or even food waste is present in a water supply, the bacteria will begin the process of breaking down this waste. When this happens, much of the available dissolved oxygen is consumed by aerobic bacteria, robbing other aquatic organisms of the oxygen they need to live.

Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) is a measure of the oxygen used by microorganisms to decompose this waste. If there is a large quantity of organic waste in the water supply, there will also be a lot of bacteria present working to decompose this waste. In this case, the demand for oxygen will be high (due to all the bacteria) so the BOD level will be high. As the waste is consumed or dispersed through the water, BOD levels will begin to decline.

Nitrates and phosphates in a body of water can contribute to high BOD levels. Nitrates and phosphates are plant nutrients and can cause plant life and algae to grow quickly. When plants grow quickly, they also die quickly. This contributes to the organic waste in the water, which is then decomposed by bacteria. This results in a high BOD level.

When BOD levels are high, dissolved oxygen (DO) levels decrease because the oxygen that is available in the water is being consumed by the bacteria. Since less dissolved oxygen is available in the water, fish and other aquatic organisms may not survive.

### Test Procedure

The BOD test takes **5 days to complete** and is performed using a dissolved oxygen test kit. The BOD level is determined by comparing the DO level of a water sample taken immediately with the DO level of a water sample that has been incubated in a dark location for 5 days. The difference between the two DO levels represents the amount of oxygen required for the decomposition of any organic material in the sample and is a good approximation of the BOD level.

1. Take 2 samples of water
2. Record the DO level (ppm) of one immediately using the method described in the dissolved oxygen test.
3. Place the second water sample in an incubator in complete darkness at 20°C for **5 days**. If you don't have an incubator, wrap the water sample bottle in aluminum foil or black electrical tape and store in a dark place at room temperature (20°C or 68 °F).
4. After 5 days, take another dissolved oxygen reading (ppm) using the dissolved oxygen test kit.
5. Subtract the Day 5 reading from the Day 1 reading to determine the BOD level. Record your final BOD result in *ppm*.

### What to Expect

<u>BOD Level</u> (in ppm)	<u>Water Quality</u>
<b>1 - 2</b>	<b>Very Good</b> There will not be much organic waste present in the water supply.
<b>3 - 5</b>	<b>Fair: Moderately Clean</b>
<b>6 - 9</b>	<b>Poor: Somewhat Polluted</b> Usually indicates organic matter is present and bacteria are decomposing this waste.
<b>100 or greater</b>	<b>Very Poor: Very Polluted</b> Contains organic waste.

**NOTE:** Generally, when BOD levels are high, there is a decline in DO levels. This is because the demand for oxygen by the bacteria is high and they are taking that oxygen from the oxygen dissolved in the water. If there is no organic waste present in the water, there won't be as many bacteria present to decompose it and thus the BOD will tend to be lower and the DO level will tend to be higher.

At high BOD levels, organisms such as macro invertebrates that are more tolerant of lower dissolved oxygen (i.e. leeches and sludge worms) may appear and become numerous. Organisms that need higher oxygen levels (i.e. caddisfly larvae and mayfly nymphs) will NOT survive.