

How Safe is Tap Water?

Bottled Water Not Always a Healthier Option for People at Risk from Tap Water

From [Earth Talk](#)

Dear EarthTalk: Bottled water companies would have us all believe that tap water is unsafe to drink. But I've heard that most tap water is actually pretty safe. Is this true?

-- Sam Tsiryulnikov, Los Angeles, CA

Tap water is not without its problems. In 2005, the nonprofit [Environmental Working Group](#)¹ (EWG) tested municipal water in 42 states and detected some [260 contaminants in public water supplies](#)². Of those, 141 were unregulated chemicals for which public health officials have no safety standards, much less methods for removing them.

Environmentalists Fault EPA for Failing to Establish Tap Water Standards

EWG did find over 90 percent compliance by water utilities in applying and enforcing standards that exist, but faulted the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#)³ (EPA) for failing to establish standards on so many of the contaminants—from industry, agriculture and urban runoff—that do end up in our water.

Tap Water vs Bottled Water

Despite these seemingly alarming stats, the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#)⁴ (NRDC), which has also conducted extensive tests on municipal water supplies as well as bottled water, says: "In the short term, if you are an adult with no special health conditions, and you are not pregnant, then you can drink most cities' tap water without having to worry." This is because most of the contaminants in public water supplies exist at such small concentrations that most people would have to ingest very large quantities for health problems to occur.

What are the Health Risks of Tap Water?

NRDC does caution, however, that "pregnant women, young children, the elderly, people with chronic illnesses and those with weakened immune systems can be especially vulnerable to the risks posed by contaminated water." The group suggests that anyone who may be at risk obtain a copy of their city's annual water quality report (they are mandated by law) and review it with their physician.

What are the Health Risks of Bottled Water?

As for bottled water, it is first important to know that 25 to 30 percent of it comes straight from municipal tap water systems, despite the pretty nature scenes on the bottles that imply otherwise. Some of that water goes through additional filtering, but some does not. NRDC has researched bottled water extensively and has found that it is "subject to less rigorous testing and purity standards than those which apply to city tap water."

Bottled water is required to be tested less frequently than tap water for bacteria and chemical contaminants, and U.S. Food and Drug Administration bottled water rules allow for some contamination by *E. coli* or *fecal coliform*, contrary to EPA tap water rules that prohibit any such contamination.

Similarly, NRDC found that there are no requirements for bottled water to be disinfected or tested for parasites such as *cryptosporidium* or *giardia*, unlike more stringent EPA rules regulating tap water. This leaves open the possibility, says NRDC, that some bottled water may present similar health threats to those with weakened immune systems, the elderly and others they caution about drinking tap water.

Goal: Make Tap Water Safe for Everyone

The bottom line is that we have invested considerably in highly efficient municipal water delivery systems that bring this precious liquid straight to our kitchen faucets any time we need it. Instead of taking that for granted and relying on bottled water instead, we need to make sure our tap water is clean and safe for all.

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