

How Safe Is Your Water?

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Is your drinking water safe? That depends on several factors: the source; the treatment the water receives, if any; and the quality of the pipes in your home.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) and the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), reports of Americans falling ill from drinking tap water are rare, and mostly involve people who are already in frail health. But it is not known how many people suffer unreported stomach upsets from bacterial contamination, or even more serious problems, like long-term exposure to contaminants like lead, from drinking tap water.

The Environmental Protection Agency regulates the community water systems that supply drinking water to most Americans. Every water system is required to publish a yearly “consumer confidence report” detailing contaminants or violations of water quality standards. You can see the report for your water system by contacting the system directly. To find your water system, visit www.epa.gov/enviro/html/sdwis/sdwis_query.html.

If your water comes from your own well, the E.P.A. advises that you test it annually, especially if you see signs of trouble like corroded pipes, strange odors or stained laundry.

Your municipality, county or state health department may offer free or low-cost testing services; otherwise, you can use a laboratory certified in your state. The E.P.A. has a list at www.epa.gov/safewater/labs/index.html. For further information on well water quality, the E.P.A. suggests consulting nonprofit groups like the American Ground Water Trust (www.agwt.org).

Health departments can offer guidance to well owners on which contaminants to test for. Ask about the presence of radon or heavy metals like arsenic in underground rocks or soils. Tell the laboratory if you live near a farm, an industrial cattle-feeding operation, a gas station, a mine, a factory, a dump or any kind of operation that might produce contaminants that can find their way into ground water.

If your water is contaminated, there are a few steps you can take.

If the issue is corroded pipes in your home, consider replacing them. If your well is contaminated by bacteria, you can have it disinfected. (Be vigilant about testing in the future.) Or you can drill a deeper well.

For a few hundred dollars, you can install a “point of entry” system to filter contaminants, like heavy metals or bacteria, out of water where it enters your home. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the E.P.A. say such filters can help people whose immune systems are weakened by H.I.V., chemotherapy, steroid treatments or other factors. Some experts also recommend them for people who are very young, very old, pregnant or frail.

A number of organizations, including Underwriters Laboratories (www.ul.com/global/eng/pages/) certify units that meet or exceed E.P.A. standards.

You can also use filters that can be attached to the tap or used in pitchers. They differ in quality and the contaminants they remove, so figure out what you need before you buy. [Consumers Union](http://www.consumersunion.org), an independent testing organization, rates these filters (www.consumersunion.org). If you use these devices, you must be vigilant about replacing the filter components as scheduled. If you neglect this, even low levels of contaminants can collect in your filter, making it a potential trouble source.

One knotty issue is the presence in the water supply of residues from prescription drugs, personal care products like sunscreen or shampoo, or other substances that scientists call “emerging contaminants.” The E.P.A. says researchers have found these compounds in water almost everywhere they have looked. They attribute this to improved sensors as well as greater prevalence.

Many of these substances seem impervious to water treatment regimes. But are they a problem for people? So far, that question remains unresolved.