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Why Drinking Bottled Water Can Be Much Worse for You Than Tap, According to New Research

"The FDA hardly has any regulations at all for bottled water."

By **Korin Miller** | Published on January 12, 2025

The health halo surrounding bottled water is starting to burst.

Bottled water first became popular in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, with many brands aligning themselves with health and fitness. Today, 96% of Americans buy bottled water and nearly one in five only drink bottled water. However, a growing body of research has found that bottled water has its own challenges – and regular tap water may be better in most situations.

A recent scientific paper published in *BMJ Global Health* argues that tap water in the U.S. is almost always a healthier choice than drinking bottled water. The paper notes that "misunderstandings about the safety and potential risks of bottled and tap water persist," adding that "tap water is generally safe, inexpensive, convenient, and eco-friendly."

But tap water has gotten its own share of criticism lately, raising a lot of questions about why it may be a better choice than its bottled counterpart. Water safety experts explain what's behind this.

Why might tap water be better than bottled water?

The biggest reason for tap water being safer than bottled water is regulations imposed by the government, says Gerald Kauffman Jr., PhD, director and associate professor at the University of Delaware Water Resources Center. "Tap water is regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency, and that protects the health of the tap water that we drink," he says.

Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act in 1974, which regulates the country's drinking water supply. The act requires public water systems to follow standards laid out by the EPA, including monitoring the water and publicly reporting on findings. The Safe Water Drinking Act also requires municipal water systems to provide annual water quality reports to users.

But the standards are not the same for bottled water. "There are more standards and regulations for water coming out of your tap than for bottled water," says John Rumpler, clean water director and senior attorney for Environment America.

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While tap water is regulated by the EPA, bottled water is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). "The FDA hardly has any regulations at all for bottled water," Kauffman says. Bottled water is also significantly more expensive than tap water, he points out.

Recent research has even found that plastic from water bottles leaches into the water, which can contain 240,000 detectable plastic fragments per liter. Of those fragments, 90% were nanoplastics, tiny pieces of plastic linked to a range of health issues, including heart disease and cancer.

But tap water isn't perfect, either. A study published in 2023 detected the presence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), aka forever chemicals, in about 45% of U.S. drinking water samples. Another 2023 study detected the presence of contaminants like arsenic, fracking fluids, lead, nitrates, chlorinated disinfection byproducts, and uranium in some municipal water systems.

When is bottled water a better choice?

While most U.S. cities have access to safe tap water, it's important to understand when it isn't the best way to go. "A lot depends on the specifics of your situation," Rumpler says. In some situations, using bottled water may be better, he says.

"Bottled water is a better choice when tap water has been deemed unsafe," says Phoebe Stapleton, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology at the Rutgers University Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute. "This may be in cases of natural disasters, water emergencies, contamination associated with water main breaks, identified contamination, or other lack of a clean water supply."

What water safety experts recommend for clean, safe drinking water

While tap and bottled water isn't perfect, experts say drinking from the tap is usually the better choice. "By and large, tap water is safe," Kauffman says. "I drink tap water."

Stapleton agrees. "Tap water has gotten a bad reputation with the rise, availability, and advertising of bottled water. However, tap water has been demonstrated to be a better choice," she says. "It is less expensive, more environmentally friendly – especially considering bottle production, processing, packaging, distribution, and disposal – and is consistently regulated at the state and federal level."

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If you're concerned about the safety of your tap water, Rumpler suggests using a water filter. "It would be prudent for people to consider filters at home for drinking water to deal with contaminants that are widespread," he says. Even if your municipal water is excellent, a filter can help remove potential odors and create a crisper taste, Kauffman says.

But Rumpler says the debate between the safety of bottled and tap water ultimately comes down to the need for stricter regulations. "The most important thing we can do to ensure clean water is to call on our public health officials to ensure they're not polluted in the first place," he says.