Is your tap water safe?

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The general consensus is that tap water is a safe, healthy, and economical choice for most Americans. What's more, experts say it's preferable to bottled water.

Why? "There is no reason to think that bottled water is any cleaner or safer since it doesn't have to meet the same stringent requirements as tap," says Jenny Powers of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

In fact, current FDA regulations don't require bottled water to be tested as frequently as the EPA requires for tap water.

A four-year intensive study of the bottled-water industry by the NRDC revealed that approximately 25 percent or more of bottled water simply comes from the tap; sometimes further treated and sometimes not. The Environmental Working Group discovered 38 pollutants, from caffeine to Tylenol to heavy metals, in the 10 brands of bottled water it tested.

Given those kinds of reports it's hard to justify the hefty price tag that bottled water commands (about 1,900 times the cost of public water according to EWG). There are also several environmental costs associated with producing and shipping bottled water across the globe and then disposing of all the empty bottles.

That said, the quality of your tap water depends on where you live. "There are certainly situations where tap water is not up to standard," says Powers, "but if you do have concerns, there are ways to check on and improve the quality of it."

Start by finding out what's in your tap water. Here's how:

- Read the annual Consumer Confidence Report from your water supplier to learn where your water comes from and what's in it. It should arrive in your mailbox each year by July 1. Or, check to see if it's available on the EPA's website. To learn how to interpret info and for other useful tips: Download Making Sense of Drinking Water "Right to Know" Reports or read Deciphering Your Water Report.
- Check out EWG's National Tap Water Quality Database to see their analysis of your water and how it compares to other towns and cities in the U.S.
- If you have well water, click here for the EPA's guidelines on keeping your water safe and healthy.

- The only way to know what's coming out of your tap is to test it. Lead, for example, might not be in your municipal supply, but it can leach from your pipes. You can buy a simple test online or at your local hardware store. Or, visit your state or municipal government website to find out if your city or town provides free lead-testing kits. Click here for links to certified labs in each state.

Use water filters to get rid of contaminants or improve the taste of your water. There are many brands and models, but here are the basics:

- Buy filters that are certified by NSF International. Look for the stamp of approval on packaging or click here for a searchable list.
- Choose a filter that gets rid of the contaminants present in your water. A carbon filter is a relatively inexpensive and common solution for many water contaminants, but check the label to make sure it's filtering what you want it to. Reverse osmosis and whole house systems are more complicated options, but in some cases may be necessary. Click here for a brief description of your different options or here for Consumer Reports' ratings on specific brands.
- Don't forget to change your filters regularly.

Environmental journalist Lori Bongiorno shares green-living tips and product reviews with Yahoo! Green's users. Send Lori a question or suggestion for potential use in a future column. Her book, Green Greener Greenest: A Practical Guide to Making Eco-smart Choices a Part of Your Life *is available on Yahoo! Shopping and Amazon.com.*