Dear Alice,

How bad is the water here in New York City? Do you recommend drinking filtered water, or does it really make a difference?

Thirsty

Answer

Dear Thirsty,

Despite your assumption that New York City (NYC) water is bad, it is, in fact, quite good! The NYC Department of Environmental Protection (NYCDEP) rigorously tests the city's tap water and reports their findings to the public annually (for the most recent official report, visit the [DEP's water quality page](http://goaskalice.columbia.edu)). In particular, three of the major culprits for drinking water contamination are lead, bacteria, and disinfectants (or their byproducts). Luckily, NYC stacks up pretty well for each of them. By most counts, the quality of NYC’s tap water is a substance worth toasting!

NYC’s water supplies are virtually lead-free — sampling indicates that the vast majority of NYC taps produce water containing only minute, insignificant quantities of lead (if any at all). These trace amounts are likely from old plumbing in homes built before 1961, plumbing installed before 1987, and any internal fixtures or plumbing containing lead. To further protect NYC residents from lead-containing pipes, phosphoric acid is often used as a protective layer on plumbing pipes to decrease the amount of lead that may dissolve into the water passing through. Additionally, New York state has carefully adjusted the pH of the tap water to make it less corrosive and therefore less likely to dissolve the pipe walls. As extra precaution, you may take some steps at home to reduce your chances of lead exposure. Some strategies include:

- Run your water for at least 30 seconds if you haven’t used the faucet for several hours; this will allow any build-up of lead to be flushed out.
- Use cold, rather than hot, water for cooking and drinking as it’s less likely to dissolve lead.
- If you live in NYC, you can call 311, a quick call line for government and non-emergency service requests, for a free lead testing kit.
Further, although the common bacteria Giardia and Cryptosporidium have been detected in some water samples, there’s no evidence that these bugs have caused any illness among NYC water drinkers. The DEP acknowledges the potential risk of gastrointestinal infection due to these waterborne bacteria but maintains that this risk is very minor. For details related to the ongoing monitoring of Giardia and Cryptosporidium, visit NYCDEP's Waterborne Disease Risk Assessment Program [3].

All NYC drinking water is treated with chlorine (to kill harmful bacteria and viruses), as well as fluoride (to help prevent tooth decay). There are some studies that show exposure to chlorine and its byproducts, over the course of decades, is associated with an increased risk for certain types of cancer. It’s worth noting that this risk is relatively small compared to those associated with non-chlorinated water. Similarly, the amount of fluoride in the water, about 0.8 milligrams per liter, is considered a safe and effective amount of fluoride for promoting dental health.

All this to say, Thirsty, the decision to filter your water depends both on how safe the water is to begin with and how effective the filter is at making it safer. Some households require no filtration and others require special filters for specific contaminants. If you’re interested in drinking filtered water, it can be purchased already filtered or you could purchase water filtration systems for tap water that you have at home.

Lastly, a helpful rule of thumb to live and hydrate by is to avoid drinking water that appears brown or discolored. If you notice the water looks a little funky, you may want to call 311 or file a report online [4]. However, if the tap water comes out cloudy or murky (milky looking), this is likely not something to be concerned about, as it is likely trapped air. Try letting the water rest for a few minutes in your glass. The trapped air from traveling through the plumbing will escape, allowing the water to turn clear again. If this doesn’t occur, it may be a good time to call 311 as well.

Hopefully this information quenches your thirst!

Alice!

Related questions

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Recurring flu symptoms or something else? [8]
Not drinking enough fluids? [9]

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