

Is Bottled Water Really Better?

... or are we wasting our money and ruining the environment?

By Lauren Tarshis

Every year, Americans buy around 30 billion bottles of water. Stack those up, and the plastic tower would stretch from Earth to the moon—13 times.

Why do we love our bottled water so much?

For one thing, it's convenient: Just grab a bottle and go, then toss it out when you're done. It's healthy too, compared with sugary sodas. And it's safer and better-tasting than tap water ... or is it?

The Truth About Tap

In fact, between 25 and 40 percent of all bottled water is tap water. Many top-selling brands, such as Dasani and Aquafina, sell tap water that has been run through a filter. But even waters bottled from springs and streams aren't necessarily better than the water you can get from your kitchen sink. In taste tests, tap water often beats them. Plus, it's likely that the water flowing from your tap has been more thoroughly tested than what you are guzzling from a bottle. That's because most cities are required to regularly test tap water to make sure it doesn't contain dangerous germs or chemicals. Bottled-water companies don't have to test as rigorously.

The Plastic Problem

The main criticism of bottled water doesn't concern the quality of the water, though, or the fact that Americans are paying for water they could get for free. It concerns those plastic bottles. According to a report by the Earth Policy Institute (EPI), 2.7 million tons of plastic are used to make plastic water bottles every year. Most of this plastic is made from crude oil—about 17 million barrels of oil for bottles purchased in the United States alone. That amount of oil could power about 1 million cars for a year, according to the EPI.

The other environmental concern is with what happens to those bottles later. They are not **biodegradable**, and though they can be **recycled**, only about 30 percent of them are. The rest wind up in **landfills**, where they will sit for hundreds of years, **leaching** harmful chemicals into the ground and contaminating—get this—the water supply.

These mountains of trashed plastic bottles have inspired a growing number of communities to take action. At Cherry Tree Elementary School in Indiana, for example, kids get reusable water cups with their lunches. Last January, the town of Concord, Massachusetts, banned the sale of single-serving bottled water. Other towns as well as some college campuses are doing the same.

Dirty Water

Not everyone can simply reject bottled water. Around the world, 780 million people do not have access to safe water. If they were to drink from the tap or from local supplies, they could get seriously sick or even die. For them, bottled water isn't a convenience. It's a life-or-death necessity.

In the U.S., banning bottled water could increase the consumption of sugary beverages, like soda or sweet teas, which are contributing to America's problem with obesity. On the other hand, reusable water bottles are widely available. Maybe more Americans would start using them if bottled water wasn't an option.

What do you think? Should bottled water get the boot?

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