Reader's Digest

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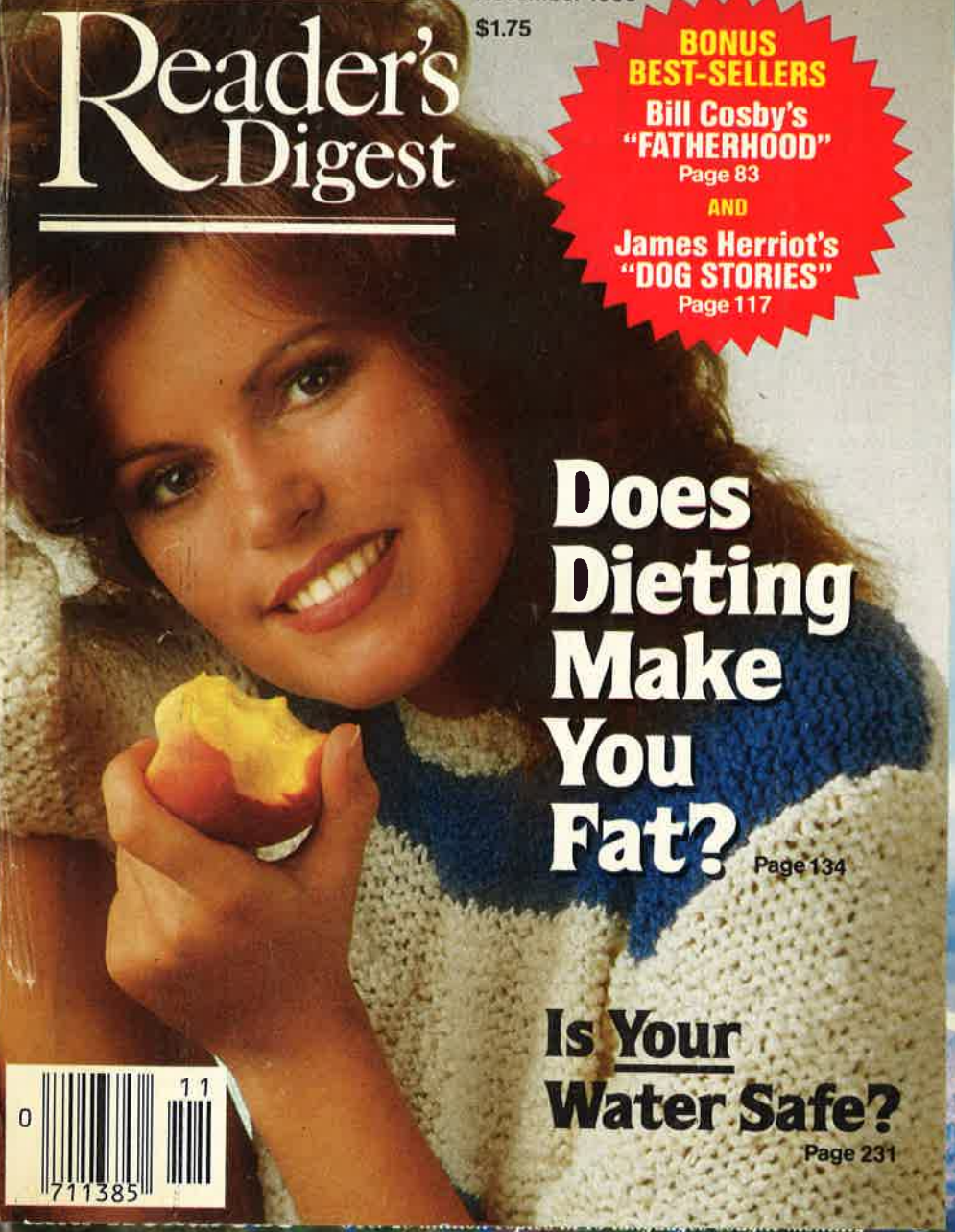

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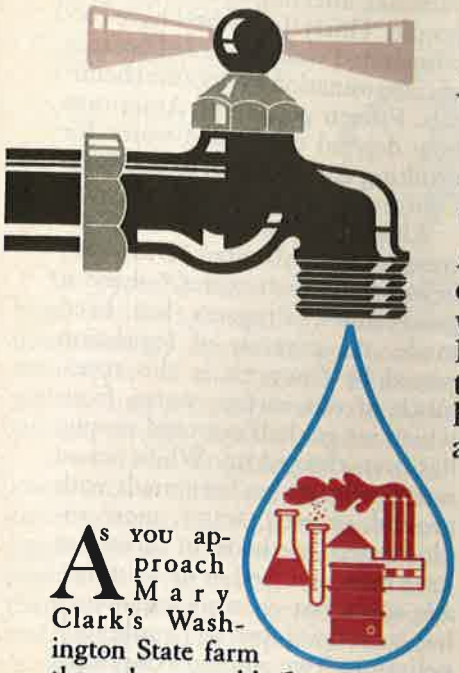

Is Your Water Safe?

Americans have always considered cheap, pure water a birthright. Not anymore. Here's how to find out if pollution has tainted your tap water, and what to do if it has

By Roul Tunley

As you approach Mary Clark's Washington State farm through emerald forests dotted with pink rhododendrons, and with snowy Mount Rainier in the background, you suddenly come upon a sign that says: CONTAMINATED AREA . . . KEEP OUT!

can no longer be rented since an occupant died of cancer.

Like many Americans, Mary Clark lived for years without knowing her water was contaminated. Then, in the early 1980s, she noticed that her tap water had become cloudy and brownish. She suspected a former waste dump on the edge of McChord Air Force Base, but officials there declined to test her well or even talk about it. Finally

using the water for any purpose.

Others might have given up and moved away. Not Mary Clark. She sued McChord. The base initially refused to accept any responsibility. "They thought they could sweep this grandma under the rug," she said. "Well, they have the wrong grandma!"

Over the years, Clark has kept up a steady drumbeat of public criticism. As a result of her efforts and growing public pressure, local authorities have run a new water system, mostly financed by the base, to her ranch as well as to others in the affected area.

Mary Clark's ordeal is an extreme example, but water pollution is not rare. Headlines about it appear regularly.

- In Pittsfield, Mass., an estimated 8000 people fall ill with diarrhea when the parasite giardia gets into the town's water supply.
- Woodstock, N.Y., residents are told by the county health department not to drink or cook with their water because it is highly contaminated with asbestos leaching from old water pipes.
- In South Carolina, near Myrtle Beach, public water is discovered to be unusually high in sodium, which has been linked to heart disease and high blood pressure.

The EPA says 20 percent of all municipal systems have detectable levels of contaminants. A 1978 study by Cornell University found that more than 63 percent of rural-household water supplies were considered unsafe (largely because of bacteria), affecting about 39 *million* people. Thirty-four states have recommended wells be closed because of contamination by organic chemicals. Fifteen percent of Americans now depend on bottled water for drinking and cooking; in Southern California the figure is 33 percent.

Although Americans are increasingly confronted with bad news about their water,* there *is* good news. Progress has been made. As a result of legislation passed by Congress in the 1970s, much of our surface water, from which we get half our total supply, has been cleaned up. While not so much progress has been made with ground, or well, water, more sophisticated methods of detection have been invented in the past decade and a fast-growing technology has been developed to handle such pollution. Two million Americans are installing purification systems in their homes each year. "I know of very few water problems that can't be treated successfully," says Don Saltman, a member of the Water Quality Association.

What can *you* do to make sure your water is safe?

First, find out what's in it. Sixty percent of Americans get their residential water from a public supply. The supplier is required by law to make periodic checks for bacteria, trace metals and other contaminants. (St. Louis, for one, makes no

*See "Time Bomb in Our Tap Water!" Reader's Digest, January '85.

fewer than 1100 analyses daily.) These results are public property, and you can request a copy.

Some systems, however, cannot afford elaborate monitoring. And under present rules many are not required to test for dangerous chemicals and toxic metals. Some cities neglect what *is* mandatory.

Keep in mind that safe water at the municipal treatment plant does not necessarily mean safe water in your home. Faulty pipes, soldering and leaks can alter it. To be sure of what's in your water, you must have it tested at the point of use.

If you are among the almost 40 percent of Americans who depend on private wells, your local government may test your water free or for a nominal fee. (Screening for the full spectrum of over 80 of the most common pollutants for which the EPA is currently proposing maximum contaminant levels would cost close to $1000.) However, some county health departments are authorized to test wells only if there is a specific problem, such as a gasoline odor or strong discoloration.

Such was the case with mine, so I decided to use one of the national, mail-order testing services that send you a kit with directions for taking samples. Most such tests cost under $100 and will give you a general idea of your water quality.* I ended up spending $89 for a general, all-purpose scan that tests for coliform bacteria, the principal organic chemicals, and dangerous metals and minerals. My well was in good shape.

If you're not as fortunate as I was and your water is unsafe, shift to bottled water and get in touch with your county or state health department. Then find out where the contamination is coming from. (Make sure *you're* not causing the trouble by, say, dumping used motor oil behind your house.) You'll probably have a pretty good idea—a nearby dump, an industrial plant, a leaking gas tank, runoff from a farm's fertilizers or pesticides. Getting someone to *admit* blame, however, can be much more

*Suburban Water Testing Laboratories (Pa.): 800-525-6464 or (for out-of-staters) 800-433-6595; WaterTest (N.H.): 800-426-8378; W.E.T. (Fla.): 305-684-7713; National Testing Laboratories (Ohio): 800-458-3330.

difficult—as it was for Mary Clark.

Occasionally, polluters will act responsibly. In eastern Suffolk County, New York, for example, where aldicarb, a pesticide widely used by potato farmers, got into ground water and contaminated wells, action was fast. Union Carbide, aldicarb's manufacturer, pulled the product off the market as soon as the problem was discovered. At its own expense, working through the county health department, the company installed separate water-purifying systems in 2600 homes.

All of this takes time. Meanwhile, you can protect your family by installing your own filter system. Be aware, however, that there is no single solution to all water pollution, no "magic bullet." Suspect anyone who wants to sell you one. Each problem requires its own, tailor-made solution.

An inexpensive device probably won't do the job. A $20 carbon counter filter, for example, can become so loaded with bacteria after a few weeks that what comes out of the tap may be worse than what went into it. It would be hard to find an effective system for less water by the average family. A good, under-the-counter device in the kitchen that provides water for drinking, cooking and ice cubes may be all you need.

The three most popular methods of purifying water are:

Carbon treatment. This method traps contaminants in charcoal filters. It is not effective in removing metals like lead, and the filters must be changed regularly. On the whole, it's the cheapest way to remove most volatile organic chemicals. It also makes water taste good. The unit itself will likely cost $150 and up.

Distillation. This treatment heats water until it turns to steam, and then allows the steam to condense into water again—theoretically, with all contamination left behind. But some contaminants (such as chloroform, a carcinogen that results when chlorine mixes with naturally decaying debris in a water supply) vaporize, recondense and wind up in the finished product, unless you have special equipment. Distillation uses a lot of energy and produces heat, which can be uncomfortable in a kitchen during the

with an activated-carbon filter. This combination takes care of just about every water problem. A good under-counter unit costs between $450 and $850, and maintenance runs $25 to $100 a year.

Choose a dealer cautiously. Some will try to sell you more than you need; others will overstate the advantages or disadvantages of a particular device. Go to a dealer who is a member of the Water Quality Association, a professional group that sets standards and to which you can write if you have a grievance. (For a list of such dealers near you, write to Water Quality Assn., 4151 Naperville Rd., Lisle, Ill. 60532. Tel: 312-369-1600.)

"It's a new industry, and there are always questionable operators out there who will promise you the moon," says Larry Stenger, a Florida manufacturer of water-treatment systems. "You've got to protect yourself."

Reprints of this article are available. See page 265.

Woman of All Seasons

THE FIRST COLD SPELL is always the hardest. Shivering as I dressed, I thought how nice it would be if I could pack up the family and go south about the first of November every year. And since there is no harm in wishing, I thought it would be nice to stay away until the spring.

But then I decided that I wouldn't mind staying in Kansas until after Thanksgiving. I like to see that creeping up of winter, the fall of the last leaves, the bleak landscape huddling patiently close to the earth. There is something about the still, cold twilight of a November day that I would miss in Florida—the hurrying figures with heads shrunk into collars, a silence in the air, a sadness, but not a hopelessness, rather an acceptance as quiet as a thin blue spiral of smoke.

And having stayed past Thanksgiving, with Christmas decorations going up, I would probably decide not to leave until the first of the year. It is fun to walk in the crowds of shoppers and see the bright windows through a soft snow. Christmas might not be the same in a bathing suit. We'd just stay past New Year's and then take a little trip.

I know what would happen then. Spring would be near, if not in fact, then in the flood of seed catalogues. January will soon pass, February is a short month, and then March will be here, with robins and pussy willows and swelling buds.

But suppose I should go away and come back for the spring. Returning from the profusion of palms and magnolias, would I be thrilled with a slender, pale-green leaf on a black stem? Spring is release, freedom from the bondage of winter, joy over returning warmth and life.

But suppose there was no winter. How could anyone love the spring who had not known the winter? What thrill would there be in running streams if you had not seen them icebound?

There cannot be day without night, joy without sorrow, nor spring without winter.

—Zula Bennington Greene,
Skimming the Cream, (Baranski)