

April 9, 1991

Mr. Richard Stump, CWS-V Vice President Suburban Water Testing Labs. 4602 Kutztown Road Temple, PA 19560

Dear Mr. Stump:

I wanted to be sure that you saw this article from the May 1, 1991 issue of **Woman's Day.** I am pleased that they called you for information and hope that the article proves helpful for you.

Sincerely,

WATER QUALITY ASSOCIATION

Maribeth M. Robb

Director of Communications

MMR/sbk encl.



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Is Your Water Voxic chemicals and nasty and nasty

germs are just a few of the dangerous contaminants that can be in a crystal-clear glass of water. If you've been feeling sick lately, you probably haven't suspected your water—maybe you should.

BY CATHERINE HOUCK

and nasty

hen Joan Thompson of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, fell too ill to do her Christmas shopping, she attributed her diarrhea and achiness to flu-until she found that nearly everyone on her street felt the same. More than 703 Pittsfield residents were eventually diagnosed with giardiasis, a parasite transmitted via water. Faulty filtration of town water was to blame.

When the Rory Blakes retired, they built a home in a remote woodland area of Pennsylvania. Water from the well they drilled proved to have a sweet, oily taste; testing disclosed high levels of TCE, a carcinogenic industrial solvent. "Undoubtedly, someone once picked this spot to dump a tanker-load of chemical

waste," says Blake. "He saved on disposal costs. The awful thing is, we lost about half the value of the house."

A decade or so ago such incidents surprised people. Today water quality is a major national worry. One out of 16 households drinks bottled water, and more than 50 million water-purifying devices are in use. Is such expense wasteful or are we gambling with our health when we drink a glass of tap water?

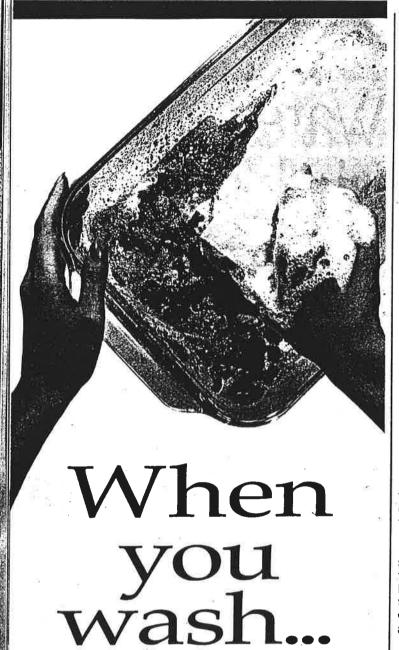
"America does not have a serious water problem," says Environmental Protection Agency spokesperson Sean McElheny. "Actually, we have the safest water in the world. Of course, isolated problems do crop up sometimes.

The question is, how do you know if your water has a problem? Because most contaminants give absolutely no hint of their presence, testing is the only way to gauge the safety of your water. Butcatch 22-you need to have a good suspicion of exactly what to look for beforehand. Testing for multiple toxins is costly and, depending on how you get your water, may not even provide you with valid information.

Fortunately, there are some rough guidelines you can follow to judge the safety of your water supply. Generally, the drinkability of water from private wells or springs is most questionable, while that from big-city systems such as New York's is most reliable. There is one major problemlead-that anyone can have.

Private Wells, Big Problems "Well owners who take clean water for granted are living with their **CONTINUED ON PAGE 46**





Is Your Water Fit to Drink? CONTINUED

heads in the sand," says Velma Smith director for the Environmental Policy Insson: No government agency whatsoever—sees the safety of private wells. The few rural wells found that two-thirds had wate one health standard.

Though over 2.000 toxins have been for the following are the most likely to pose Microbes—bacteria, viruses and parasite 50 times more reported cases of acute il between 1971 and 1985) than any other treated water. They can cause severe s tions, hepatitis A and a variety of low-gra diarrhea, fatigue and skin rashes. Proble: ly in areas—the far northwest and the eas that have a heavy concentration of septic least one minute usually will purify the Nitrates, from fertilizer used in farming, lem in Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and Minvelopment built on former farm fields. cause shortness of breath in adults and Petrochemicals commonly seep into wate ground storage tanks found near airport especially filling stations. Heavy conce can be smelled, but enough can be prese with no discernible change in the water Toxic chemicals pose a risk if a well is no (operating or closed), a chemical, indplant or a mining area or mill. The hazard commonly detected include industrial metals as arsenic, barium and cadmium radioactive elements; asbestos and peg which leads the nation in production of to of the most serious groundwater contam find out about toxic waste near your hor. **Emergency Planning Committee and ask** Inventory, required by law.) Though wat still be tainted, well owners should be es their water smells like solvents or acquire be suspicious of unexplained, chronic c tion), itchy eyes or respiratory problems PCBs—carcinogenic chemicals—are a p. a submersible, two-wire water pump i 1979. (The EPA estimates that up to 50 use.) These pumps often contained a P(under some circumstances can make its Radon is a problem in areas high in n. New England, Radon passes into househ from showers or teakettles and has been

Municipal Systems: Bigger Is Better Any system serving more than 25 people water supply, whether the water comes free rivers. Big-city water is considered the cause the utilities have the most sophistic equipment, can afford trained personnel testing. Says the EPA's Sean McElhery, sources, urban Americans drink the safe

Theoretically, the water from small wat protected against the same 83 contam systems. In reality, small-town drinking near the attention paid to city water. The be tested as frequently, employees are o experienced and the water-purifying dev operate as efficiently.

cancer risks.

How bad these problems are is a matter of dispute. According to a recent Ralph Nader report, 35 percent of the nation's municipal systems have consistently not passed their tests during the last decade. The EPA, however, maintains that only 13 percent of community systems have detectable levels of at least one contaminant. Water companies are required to notify customers of such violations, and are closed down if violations remain uncorrected—though environmental groups claim that those actions are seldom taken.

Lead: A Special Threat

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Because lead leaches into water through pipes, this metal is a problem for both well owners and public water customers. Chronic exposure to even low amounts can damage fetuses and cause irreversible brain damage in children, says the EPA's lead expert Jeanne Briskin.

Lead has no taste or odor but may cause a greenish stain in

your sink. You also should be concerned if:

 Your home is less than 5 years old. Lead solder, used until recently to connect copper pipes, is the culprit in this case.
 (It's easy to identify: Look for dull gray material, located at pipe

joints, that's easily scratched with a knife.)

• Your water is soft (containing few minerals) or acidic (common in acid-rain areas). "Lead was used in public water pipes up until World War II," says Briskin. "However, if water is hard or nonacidic, pipes get a mineral-deposit coating on the inside that protects the water. Where water is acidic, as in much of New England and New York, pipes won't have that coating and lead is more likely to corrode into drinking water."

Hot water dissolves lead more quickly than cold, so always use cold for cooking or making baby formula. If you live in a single-family home, also let water run for a minute or two before using, as the longer water has been sitting in pipes, the more lead it tends to absorb. (In large apartment buildings, however, which can have thousands of gallons running through the pipes, running the water won't do a thing but waste water.)

Test, but Don't Get Soaked

What seems clear is that though most tap water is perfectly safe, some is suspect. The question then becomes not only what should be done but how to avoid spending unnecessary money.

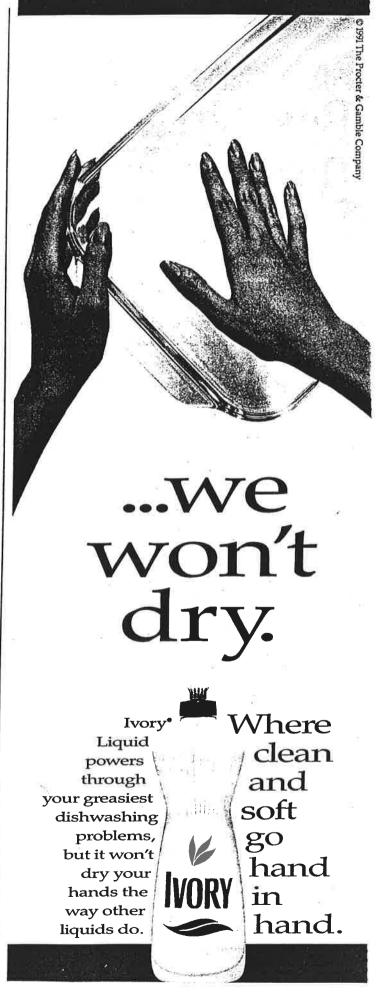
For municipal water users, paying to have water tested can be a waste of money except for ruling out the presence of lead. Because the amount of chlorine in water changes from hour to hour, tests for bacteria and other toxins are meaningless, explains Suburban Water Testing's Richard Stump. And since many systems get their water from more than one source, tests taken one day could be worthless the next.

Instead of testing, municipal users would do better to check up on the adequacy of local testing, says Trudie Lay of the American Water Works Association. Call the water company and ask for information. What is the water tested for? Does the water meet all required standards? What violations does the company have, are these violations reported to the public and, if so, where? Ask for the information in writing and expect to receive it in a week.

One way of double-checking the competence of your water company is to call a comparable neighboring one and ask for a list of what it tests for. If your utility isn't testing for the same substances, find out why.

For well owners, testing is crucial. Before testing, though, you should get as much information about local conditions as possible. What crops are grown nearby, using what pesticides? What kinds of chemicals might be leaking from nearby industrial pumps? Your library is one source of information. You might also call the National Pesticide Telecommunications Network CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

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Is Your Water Fit to Drink? CONTINUED

ropes adding

(800-858-7378) and the Citizens Clearing House for Hazardous Waste (703-237-2249).

A good schedule for well owners to follow is yearly testing for bacteria and petrochemicals if any gasoline storage tanks are nearby, and a one-time test for lead. Neighbors might consider taking turns testing for pesticides or herbicides, which would probably be present in the area rather than in just one well. Often county health departments will test for bacteria free, and sometimes for pesticides as well. Try them first.

The county health department is also a good source for names of nearby state-certified labs. Sometimes local labs will come to your home to collect the water samples; most often you'll have to draw and deliver them yourself.

A good lab should provide special containers into which to run the water, along with specific directions on mailing the package back. "To do an accurate bacteria test, water must be kept chilled and tested within thirty hours; to do lead, the water must be acidified to the correct pH, in a special container," says Water-Test's Gene Rosov. Commercial labs usually charge \$25 to \$30. If you know what to look for, testing for an assort-

ment of contaminants can usually be done for about \$200, though some substances run considerably more. Asbestos, for instance, costs around \$500.

Three reputable national labs, with efficient delivery systems for picking up samples anywhere in the country, are: WaterTest (800-426-8378); Suburban Water Testing (800-433-6595) and National Testing (800-458-3330).

Cleaning Up Bad Water

Few contamination problems are so bad that they can't be cleaned up, though with some 500 manufacturers now hawking gadgets, the shopper must beware. Already the Federal Trade Commission has ordered one company to stop marketing a device that was leaking carcinogenic chemicals into the water it was supposed to be purifying.

For any major expenditure, a Water Quality Association certified dealer is most reliable. (Never buy from the same business that tests your water.) The WQA, a trade association, sets industry standards, and any customer with a grievance can contact them. For a list of local dealers, write WQA, 4151 Naperville Road, Lisle, IL 60532 (or call 708-505-0160).

The best-selling systems are:

· Activated carbon filters: The cheape way to remove many chemicals and pe ticides. Used alone, though, it is not fective for lead or bacteria, and it i quires vigilant maintenance to preve bacteria breeding in dirty filters. Makwater taste good. Can be placed und the sink or at end of faucets. Cost: \$25 \$800, depending on size and capaci Reverse osmosis: Water is forc through high-tech membranes that fi out impurities. This machine gets ric most known contaminants but uses to three gallons of water for every g one produced. It's installed under sink, with water delivered through a tl faucet on the sink. A special pump I be needed for homes with low water p sure. Cost: \$250 to \$1,000.

Distillation: This device turns water steam and back again, leaving contanants behind. Used with a carbon fi distillation produces the purest wate tainable; newer models use less elecity than formerly and don't give off the state of t

Cost: \$225 to \$1,500.

• Ultraviolet: Extremely effective on crobes but little else. This device is ular because it requires no mainten or changing of filters. Cost: \$500.

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