

How Safe is Our Drinking Water?

March 31, 2021

- Consumer Reports collected unfiltered tap water samples from 120 volunteers across the country and found widespread contamination with PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances), lead and arsenic, including a significant number of samples that exceeded levels considered safe by health experts.
- **Concerning PFAS contamination found in more than one-third of samples tested.** CR found measurable levels of PFAS in 118 of the 120 samples tested.
- More than 35 percent of the samples exceeded 10 parts per trillion (ppt) total PFAS, a safety threshold that scientists and other health experts think should be the maximum total amount allowed in water.
- More than one-quarter of all samples exceeded 5 ppt for a single PFAS, the maximum amount CR says should be allowed for one PFAS chemical.
- Two samples tested by CR exceeded 70 ppt for total PFAS: one in Pittsboro, NC (80.2 ppt), and another in Alexandria, VA (73 ppt).
- The technology exists to cleanse water of dangerous contaminants, but these filtration systems are not being used uniformly in communities across the country.
- There are currently no enforceable limits set by the EPA for PFAS in drinking water. Instead, the EPA has established a voluntary combined limit of 70 ppt for two PFAS compounds (PFOA and PFOS).
- Manufacturers use PFAS to make stain-resistant fabrics and clothing, nonstick cookware, food packaging, and many other products. These compounds can seep into water from factories, landfills, and other sources and are often called “forever chemicals” because they don’t break down easily in the environment. PFAS exposure has been linked to some cancers, and learning delays in children.
- **Every water sample tested had measurable levels of arsenic.** In addition, every sample CR tested had measurable levels of arsenic, including ten with levels between 3 and 10 ppb, about 8 percent of the total. The current EPA limit for arsenic is 10 ppb, although the EPA had previously considered a 3 ppb limit as feasible. Arsenic can enter water through natural deposits or industrial or agricultural pollution. Exposure to arsenic has been linked to lowered IQ in children and cancer.
- **Lead detected in nearly every water sample tested** Nearly all samples tested by CR had measurable levels of lead, which can contaminate water when it leaches from lead service lines and lead pipes in people’s homes. Scientists and the EPA agree that exposure to lead is unsafe at any level. It has been tied to reduced IQ and slowed growth in children, high blood pressure, and reproductive problems.
- The EPA does not require utilities to take significant steps to lower lead in water – including replacing service lines – unless 10 percent or more of samples from homes exceed 15 ppb. One water sample collected by CR in New Britain, CT, had lead levels of 31.2 ppb, more than double what the federal government deems safe. CR believes that the EPA should collect and test more samples from inside people’s homes to better protect consumers.