Q: What's the Best Water Filter?

"What is the best type of water to use for cooking and drinking -- filtered, distilled or bottled? "

DR. WEIL'S ANSWER

A: (Published 10/11/2000)

I have always recommended drinking high-quality bottled water or, if possible, getting a water-purification system for your home. However, before you spend any money on a filtration system, find out what's in your water -- have your tap water tested for contaminants such as, fecal-coliform bacteria, lead, fluoride, chlorine, arsenic, and nitrates, as well as parasites, other microorganisms, sulfates, herbicides, and pesticides. (Don't rely on the free testing offered by companies selling water purifiers -- they're not thorough enough. Instead, use an independent lab.)

Chlorine and lead are two of the most common contaminants in water. Chlorine is a strong oxidizing agent that may increase the risk of heart disease and is linked to certain cancers. Water containing more than ten parts per billion of lead is a health risk, especially for infants, children, and pregnant women -- and probably for everyone else, as well. Even small amounts can lead to organ damage and stunt the nervous system. If you are using tap water for drinking or cooking, I also suggest that you get in the habit of flushing your kitchen faucet daily by letting water run for three to five minutes in the morning (or after periods of disuse).

Bottled water is only a temporary solution to the problem. It is too expensive for regular use, and you cannot count on its safety. According to a recent investigation by the Natural Resources Defense Council, bottled water is sometimes tap water in disguise -- and even bottled spring water can be contaminated. (To read more about the NRDC report, go to: http://www.nrdc.org/water/drinking /bw/bwinx.asp.)

In the past, I have recommended filters which combine carbon-block filtration with an electrochemical mechanism that exposes water to a copper-zinc alloy called KDF. Recently, I became aware of new technology for distilling water at home that does the job better than earlier purification systems. This method, called D-3, can be mounted under the sink, works silently, always produces cool water (some distillation systems produce hot water when the unit is replenishing its storage reserve), and is self-sterilizing. The D-3 comes with a built-in pump, automatic drain, and all the hoses, fixtures, and "extras" that end up adding to the price of other purification systems.

Although the system is pricey (about $2,200, installed), the cost works out over time to be much less than that of bottled water. I've never recommended distilling in the past because it was an impractical method for home use -- distillers were large, loud, and required quite a lot of electricity, water, and maintenance. But I've always thought distilled water was really the best water filtering method.

Still, some critics claim it's unhealthy because the process removes minerals, it can leach minerals from our bodies, and it fails to remove volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as solvents and pesticides. However, I believe that our primary sources of minerals are fruits and vegetables, not water. In fact, our bodies have very active systems for holding onto the minerals we need. Finally, virtually all distillers now have in-line carbon filters to remove VOCs. For more information on this new distilling method, call Glacier Water Systems Inc. (866) 382-3442