

Break the bottled water habit and save

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The Savings Experiment
for Walletpop.com

Bottled water? That's so '80s.

The \$14.4 billion bottled-water market

has come under fire for being environmentally incorrect as those discarded plastic containers keep piling up in landfills.

Meanwhile, decades of marketing that touted costly bottled water as cleaner, healthier and better tasting than tap water turned out to be a lot of hype. Not only is most good-old-fashioned tap water safe and clean, experts say, but swearing off the bottle also saves you a bundle.

Here's how to turn on the tap and let the savings pour in -- without sacrificing flavor.

The truth about tap

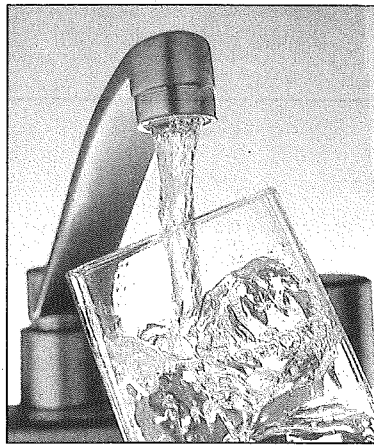
Before you get swept away by fancy-looking water bottles with fancy slogans ("collected from spring water sources," "filtered naturally through layers of glacial sand") at a cost of \$2 a bottle, consider this: More than 90 percent of U.S. water systems meet all regulations from the Environmental Protection Agency.

So you can be pretty confident in the water coming out of your tap, said Celia Kuperszmid-Lehrman, deputy home editor for Consumer Reports.

But bottled water is largely unmonitored. According to Food & Water Watch, a nonprofit aimed at providing access to safe and affordable drinking water, the Food and Drug Administration regulates only 30 to 40 percent of the bottled water sold across state lines.

And despite claims from bottled water manufacturers that their product comes from pure mountain springs or groundwater sources, experts say that these days more bottled water comes from a municipal supply, just like tap water. Which raises the question: Why buy the cow if you can drink the milk for (practically) free?

As most of the nation's water supply comes from a municipality,



A glass of tap water will quench your thirst for little cost.

your local water utility is required to issue a water-quality report, which is one way to find out about the quality and safety of the water in your area.

For a comprehensive primer on tap water, including the stuff from the unregulated, private wells that supply about 10 percent of the U.S. population, consult the EPA's guide to drinking tap water on the agency's website, says Kuperszmid-Lehrman.

There you also can find a report about the water quality in your area. You can also call the EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline at 1-800-426-4791.

Tap savings with tap water

Single-serve portions of bottled water, the most common being the 16-ounce size, accounted for more than 60 percent of the volume of bottled water sold in 2009, according to Food & Water Watch.

And while consumers' water bills vary, as does the price of bottled water (ranging from 70 cents to \$2), here's a telling contrast: Tap water costs less than 1 cent per gallon, says Kate Fried, a spokesperson for Food & Water Watch. But if you pay \$1 per 16-ounce container, bottled water adds up to about \$8 per gallon.

Filter out costs

Water taste and quality varies across the country. But no matter where you live, many Americans have grown accustomed to the taste of filtered tap water.

"Most people, when they think of water, they think of water as

being relatively tasteless," said Kuperszmid-Lehrman. "That's what they go for." Hence the popularity of filters.

Consumers also use filters to flush out minerals and particles. But even when factoring in the cost of the variety of filtering systems on the market, filtered tap water is far more affordable than bottled water, when you sift through the price comparisons.

Carafes/Pitcher filters

Carafes/pitchers, the kind that sit in your refrigerator, have become ubiquitous in U.S. households and are simple to use.

They range in price from about \$20 to \$40 and their replacement filters cost about \$48 a year. So if the average cost of a pitcher is \$30 and replacement filters cost \$48 annually, that's about \$80 for a year's worth of filtered water.

How much bottled water will \$80 buy? In single servings, it's about 11 gallons, calculates Emily Wurth, director of water policy at Food & Water Watch.

So even if you're a moderate water drinker who downs just one 16-ounce bottle a day, you'll spend about \$80 for just a three-month supply, or 11 gallons worth, of bottled water.

Meanwhile, that \$80 will get you at least a year's worth of filtered tap water. Oops -- make that \$80.11 when figuring in the cost of the tap water.

Consumer Reports gave the Clear20 carafe, at about \$30, its highest Best Buy rating, and also recommended Brita's small pitcher filter, priced at approximately \$32.

Keep in mind that carafe filters can only filter a limited amount of water at a time, so they might not be the optimal choice for a big family that consumes a lot of water.

Faucet-mount filters

These filters screw directly onto your faucet, filter more water than

a carafe and easily supply water for cooking.

Faucet mount filters range from about \$15 to \$35, while their replacement filters run from \$30 to \$100, Kuperszmid-Lehrman said.

They, too, are an inexpensive option to bottled water. The cost of a faucet-mount filter and its replacement filters will range from \$55 to \$100 for a year's worth of drinking water, Kuperszmid-Lehrman estimated. "How easily can you blow through that kind of money buying bottled water?"

One thing to keep in mind: Faucet-mounted filters slow the flow of water and can't be used on all faucets.

Countertop filters

These filters, designed to filter large quantities of water without modifying plumbing, fall into a much higher-priced category, at around \$300.

Even so, filtering tap water with a countertop unit costs 25 cents per gallon, while bottled water typically costs more than \$10 per gallon, Food & Water Watch estimates.

One thing to consider: Countertop filters can't be used with all types of faucets and can clutter your counter.

Because of concerns about contaminants in water, such as lead and chlorine, buy filters certified by the public health and safety group NSF International, which tests products to ensure that they remove what the manufacturers say they do, recommends The Green Guide for Everyday Living.

Savings on the go

If you're in the habit of stocking up on bottled water that you sip all day at work, wean yourself from bottled water and instead purchase a refillable water bottle, which will only cost you about \$4 to \$7.

Refill your bottle at your office's filtered water cooler and drink in the savings.

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