

Water, Water Everywhere, But When is it Safe to Drink?

When you travel, drinking lots of water helps you stay fit – as long as the water is fit to drink. Being well hydrated helps counteract some of the vagaries of travel: fatigue and jetlag, altitude, and hot and cold environments, to mention a few. Minimal dehydration occurs even before you feel thirsty, subtly affecting your mental and physical abilities.

But available drinking water is not always fit to drink. Microorganisms that cause intestinal upsets may be present in tap water in developing countries and sometimes aboard cruise ships and airliners.

Here's how to get the clean glass, so to speak:

1 Always drink bottled water when traveling.

Water everywhere contains some microorganisms. While your body is accustomed to the ones in your tap water at home, those in water elsewhere - even where sanitation is good - may be sufficiently different to cause mild discomfort the first few days you drink it. Such discomforts are often blamed on jetlag and fatigue. Remedies for these include drinking water. If you drink tap water, your “remedy” worsens your discomfort. The more water you drink, the more likely you will ingest sufficient organisms to make you ill.

Drink bottled water if you take antacids, which reduce stomach acidity. Acidity helps kill organisms. Drink bottled water if you have diabetes or an immune problem, or are pregnant or elderly. Intestinal illnesses are more troublesome with these conditions.



2 All bottled water is not created equal.

Bottled water is merely subterranean spring water or treated tap water, and, unless optimally processed, is no better than tap water. Where sanitation is poor, opt for well-known international brands. Local brands may contain organisms and sometimes chemicals and other contaminants (arsenic in southern Asia, for example).

Drinking carbonated bottled water adds a layer of safety. Carbonation acidifies water, killing organisms. Such water is known everywhere as “with gas,” even by waiters who speak no English.

Some bottled water is mineral water and contains calcium, sodium and other minerals, often in large amounts. These may worsen certain heart and kidney problems. Read labels. Some overseas spas tout their waters as therapeutic for virtually anything that ails you, claims largely unproven.

3 “No ice, please.”

Ice is acceptable in areas where sanitation is good; a cube or two is unlikely to contain sufficient organisms to cause illness. But where sanitation is suspect, cubes are usually made from tap water, often in difficult-to-clean equipment. For ice addicts, you can cool drinks by placing ice in a leak-proof plastic bag and inserting the bag into your drink.

4

“No ice, please” does not necessarily mean that you’ll get no ice.

Often when you ask for no ice in a drink that traditionally takes ice, you will get ice. It’s habit. When you remind waiters of your request, they take out the ice, but how?

- Remove it (with their hands?) and fill the glass with more of the drink?
- Pour out the drink and fill the same glass with a new drink?
- Get a new glass with a fresh drink?

Hopefully, “c”. In “a” and “b,” the water from the melting ice is in your drink or adhering to your original glass.

5

Even 100-proof liquor on the rocks does not make for a 100% foolproof drink.

Alcohol does reduce the number of organisms in a drink, but slowly. The rate depends on the amount of alcohol in the drink, the size of the ice cubes, and the types of organisms in the ice. If you’re drinking at a bar, odds are the bar will close before your drink is safe.





6 Canisters and special taps in hotel rooms labeled “safe to drink” may not be so safe.

Water in canisters is refilled from tanks wheeled down the hall, a process subject to lapses in sanitation. Water from special taps requires optimum disinfecting, proper storing and clean pipes.

7 A ribbon can avoid intestinal upsets.

Tie a brightly colored ribbon around the tap, a reminder to use bottled water. However, when tap water is too hot to touch, it is generally safe. It is “pasteurized,” having remained heated in the heater and pipes sufficiently long to kill organisms.

Boiled water is always safe. Carry an electrical coil, a current converter and a socket adapter, available in travelers’ supply catalogues. Boiling for a few seconds (yes, seconds) suffices to kill organisms. Note that boiling does not remove chemicals and other impurities.

8 Opt for humdrum canned beverages over tempting fresh fruit drinks from street vendors.

Fruit drinks are usually squeezed in impossible-to-clean equipment and may be diluted with tap water and contain ice.

9 In the wilderness, never drink water from streams, lakes or springs.

Crystal clear water in pristine surroundings may contain organisms from birds, animals and humans. Boil or disinfect natural water. Disinfectants and filters are available at sporting goods stores and on the Internet. Follow instructions on labels.



10 Recreational water is for swimming, not swallowing.

Even at well-maintained swimming facilities, swimmers placing their heads underwater tend to have more intestinal illnesses than swimmers who do not, and waders have fewer illnesses than swimmers. Factors increasing risk include: crowding, babies in diapers, and no chlorination (lakes and rivers), for example.



10 Tips

for Obtaining Safe Water and Other Beverages When You Travel



Two diners sit in a restaurant overseas. One asks the waiter for a glass of water. The other says he wants the same, but the last time he was at this restaurant he was served water in a dirty glass, and became ill. The waiter listens, goes, and returns with two glasses, and asks, “Which one of you asked for a clean glass?”