

Pharmaceuticals Pollute U.S. Tap Water

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WASHINGTON - A wide range of pharmaceuticals that include antibiotics, sex hormones, and drugs used to treat epilepsy and depression, contaminate drinking water supplies of at least 41 million Americans, according to a 5-month investigation by the Associated Press National Investigation Team released today.

“Environmental Working Group's (EWG) studies show that tap water across the U.S. is contaminated with many industrial chemicals, and now we know that millions of Americans are also drinking low-level mixtures of pharmaceuticals with every glass of water,” said Jane Houlihan, EWG Vice President for Research. “The health effect of this cocktail of chemicals and drugs hasn't been studied, but we are concerned about risks for infants and others who are vulnerable. Once again, the press is doing EPA's work when it comes to informing the public about contaminated tap water.”

Environmental Working Group analysis shows that of the top 200 drugs in the U.S., 13 percent list serious side effects at levels less than 100 parts-per-billion (ppb) in human blood, with some causing potential health risks in the parts-per-trillion range. EWG calls on EPA to take swift action to set standards for pollutants in tap water that will protect the health of Americans nationwide, including children and others most vulnerable to health risks from these exposures.

Drug residues contaminate drinking water supplies when people take pills. While their bodies absorb some of the medication, the rest of it is flushed down the toilet. Drinking water treatment plants are not designed to remove these residues, and the AP team uncovered data showing these same chemicals in treated tap water and water supplies in 24 major metropolitan areas around the US. EWG's national tap water atlas shows tap water testing results from 40,000 communities around the country.

All of the pharmaceuticals reported in drinking water supplies are unregulated in treated tap water—any level is legal. Not only has the EPA failed to set standards for pharmaceuticals, but also they have failed to require utilities to test for these chemicals. The drug residues in tap water join hundreds of other synthetic chemicals Americans are exposed to daily, as contaminants in food, water, and air, or in common consumer products. EWG found an average of 200 industrial chemicals, pesticides and other pollutants in umbilical cord blood from 10 babies born in the U.S., indicating that our exposures to toxic chemicals begin in the womb, when risks are greatest.