

Nasty Bottles

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CHEYENNE -- So what's in your water?

Consumers are urged to "reduce, reuse and recycle." But doing so with plastic water bottles could be harmful to your health.

Refilling and reusing these containers increases the risk of exposure to bacteria.

And disposable bottles are designed for a single use, said Janet Conner, infection control practitioner at Cheyenne Regional Medical Center.

The mouth is a natural breeding ground for bacteria, fungi and viruses. These microbes get passed from lips to bottle in search of another moist environment to invade.

Another problem with disposable water containers is the narrow opening. Even if someone took the time to wash out one of these bottles, there's no guarantee it would get any cleaner, said Gary Hickman.

He's director of environmental health for the Cheyenne-Laramie County Health Department.

Hickman added that when drinkers refill one of these bottles, they are mixing saliva with tap water.

But this is a common mistake.

Hickman said he is just as guilty as anyone else of trying to maximize the use of these containers.

Jennifer Escobedo, environmental health specialist with the local health agency, said it doesn't take long for a slimy layer to build up on the bottle opening.

Even reusing the bottle once increases the risk. And the problem gets worse if people reuse the same bottle day after day.

During a recent housecleaning, she found an unfinished water bottle on her son's dresser. The container had sat out for a couple of days and was starting to smell.

Hickman said the effect would be comparable to the mouth of people who stop brushing their teeth for a few days: It probably won't produce illness because people are accustomed to their own germs, but it certainly isn't hygienic.

When consumers pull a bottle off the shelf it is pure, potable water. Once they add their backwash, it dilutes the purity.

"After use, it's not potable," he said. "It's drinkable but you can't sell it that way."

Sure, the bottle may seem clean. But just refill it once and shake. Hickman said consumers should be able to spot a colony of "floaties" that weren't there before.

He added that a bottle doesn't need to sit out for several days to make the trick work.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL SMITH/WTE Some resourceful consumers are reusing their water bottles, but some experts say this puts them at a greater risk for bacteria. Those experts say refilling and reusing these containers increases the risk of exposure to bacteria.

A small collection of germs doesn't pose much of a problem, but a large enough build-up could be a concern.

It also isn't a good idea to share a reused bottle with friends. Exposure to unfamiliar bacteria could make them sick.

Wide-mouthed, reusable plastic bottles are an option, but consumers still need to use common sense, experts say.

And coffee drinkers shouldn't reuse mugs without a thorough washing. The same principle applies to plastic bottles.

Just wash with soap and warm water, making sure that the soapy mixture gets inside the bottle, Conner said. Or put the bottle in the dishwasher.

"As long as (bottles) are disinfected correctly and completely, there is nothing wrong with (reuse)," she said. "Washing (bacteria) away eliminates the problem. It's pretty simple and straightforward."

But whether a bottle is meant to be reused or thrown away, some consumers are worried about the chemicals used to produce plastics.

Over time the bottle starts to deteriorate and could leach chemicals into the water, Escobedo said.

She added that consumers shouldn't let their plastic bottles sit in the sun for too long or chill in the freezer. Using the dishwasher also could speed up the deterioration process.

According to the Food and Drug Administration, these containers are safe under any of these conditions.

The American Chemistry Council says polycarbonate plastic does become cloudy from normal wear, but this won't impact health. Bottles should only be tossed if there are cracks.

Hickman said there aren't data specifically linking water bottle use to illnesses like cancer, but researchers are reopening the case.

After all, this is a fairly new concern. Bottled water was not an issue 10 years ago when people lugged thermoses to work. Today, as consumers buy more packaged water, they want assurance that their products are safe.

Escobedo said newer, reusable bottles should be fine to use. But consumers who remain uneasy could switch to glass or stainless steel bottles as alternatives.