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12 cities with the worst tap water in the US

Aria Bendix Mar 17, 2020, 8:13 AM



Safe drinking water should be clear. KariDesign/Shutterstock

Millions of people are exposed to unsafe drinking water every year in the US.



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Other cities are reeling from the aftermath of chemical spills, which have released toxic substances into their main water supplies.

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Imagine turning on the tap in the morning to find an unpleasant brown sludge that tastes like metal. Then imagine that state officials told you that water was safe to drink.

That was the reality for residents of Flint, Michigan in 2014, when [lead from aging pipes](#) seeped into their water system, effectively poisoning an entire community.

Read more: [Erin Brockovich is warning about an emerging drinking-water crisis in the US. Here's how she recommends you protect yourself.](#)

The scandal was one of the most egregious instances of water contamination in the US, but it wasn't an isolated occurrence. Every year from 1982 to 2015, between [9 million and 45 million Americans](#) got their drinking water from a source that violated the standards of the



While rural areas are the most contaminated, a few major cities have struggled to renovate their aging pipes and enforce safe standards among local jurisdictions. Here are some of the cities with the worst tap water in the US.

Pittsburgh officials have been accused of downplaying the threat of lead-contaminated drinking water.



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Liberty Bridge in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Christian Hinkle/Shutterstock

In 2017, the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority [issued a warning](#) to residents to boil their tap water before drinking it. Even basic activities like brushing teeth or washing dishes should be done with boiled water, they said.

The alert went out after Pennsylvania's environmental regulators discovered low levels of chlorine in the water system, which could potentially expose residents to a [parasite called giardia](#) that causes diarrhea, cramps, and nausea.

The city has also struggled to combat high levels of lead in drinking water, with the EPA reporting that there are [not enough state officials](#) to perform mandatory inspections. A 2017 audit revealed that health officials in Pittsburgh [may have misled residents](#) into thinking that their drinking water was safe.



Milwaukee health officials may have failed to warn families whose children tested positive for lead.

Milwaukee activists have called for the mayor to resign. Suzanne Tucker/Shutterstock

Milwaukee has also been mired in scandal when it comes to safe drinking water. In 2018,



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Residents were previously [told to install water filters](#) if they lived in a home built prior to 1951 due to concerns about lead contamination. In 2018, environmental activists [called upon Milwaukee's mayor](#), Tom Barrett, to resign over the crisis.

Officials still aren't sure if the water in Flint is safe to drink.



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Demonstrators protest the Flint, Michigan contaminated water crisis in 2016. Reuters/Rebecca Cook

Flint residents may no longer be encountering the same odorous brown sludge they discovered in 2014, but local politicians are still worried about whether the tap water is contaminated.

In 2017, after three years of distributing bottled water to local residents, Flint officials declared the water safe to consume. But Michigan congressman Dan Kildee has said that [the city can't trust](#) its water supply until all of the lead service pipes had been replaced. Flint aims to finish [replacing its old pipes](#) this year.

The Flint crisis has been spilling over into Detroit public schools.



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A five-year-old sits at his desk at Palmer Park Preparatory Academy in Detroit. Kimberly P. Mitchell/Detroit Free Press/TNS/Getty Images

Michigan's aging infrastructure has posed a similar problem in Detroit, which began testing water supplies in schools in the wake of the Flint crisis.

In September 2018, at least 57 out of 86 Detroit [public schools tested positive](#) for elevated levels of copper or lead. Children exposed to lead can suffer from permanent brain damage, which often results in learning disabilities and increased violent behavior.

The results prompted Detroit's school district to [shut off water fountains](#) in public schools across the city and replace them with temporary water coolers. The city has since [installed filtration systems](#) in every public school.



Newark's lead contamination is at an all-time high.

A Newark resident whose home plumbing is lined with lead pipes. Julio Cortez/AP Images

From 2017 to 2019, Newark's drinking water showed lead levels that exceeded 15 parts per billion — the threshold above which the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [requires public water systems](#) to "take action" to reduce lead contamination. Testing from January to



the water disinfecting process, cause skin irritation, and potentially [increase cancer risk](#).
Nine of the city's [dozen testing sites](#) have shown high levels of HAAs.

The city has distributed free water filters to local residents. It's also working to [replace its lead service lines](#), a process that could take eight years.

Washington, DC has seen lead-contaminated water since the early 2000s.



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A restaurant manager uses bottled water in his DC restaurant in 2014. Astrid Riecken/The Washington Post/Getty Images

DC's legacy of contamination dates back to the early 2000s, when Marc Edwards — the same man who sounded the alarm on the Flint water crisis — warned residents of [elevated levels of lead](#) in their drinking water.

By 2016, around [12,000 DC buildings](#) were still getting their water from lead pipes. Many of the homes at risk of contamination are located in older, less affluent neighborhoods. On average, some homeowners could have to [pay around \\$2,500](#) to have their lead pipes removed.

Residents of Brady, Texas, are worried about radium in their water supply.



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A sign at McCulloch County Courthouse in Brady, Texas. Billy Hathorn/Wikimedia Commons

Texas has [the most widespread water violations](#) in the US, due in large part to the presence of radium — a radioactive substance that's been linked to bone cancer — in its water supply.

The small city of Brady, Texas, has encountered radium levels that are [nine times higher](#) than the EPA limit. Local [residents report](#) that the tap water can be orange, brown, or even green in color, and many have resorted to [drinking bottled water](#) instead.



Baltimore has a cloudy reservoir with potentially toxic particles.

Children play with a basketball in front of a vacant home in the Reservoir Hill neighborhood of Baltimore. Patrick Semansky/AP Images

Baltimore's [water samples](#) don't contain nearly as much lead as samples in Newark or Detroit, but at least two dozen schools have been found to have [elevated levels of lead](#) in their drinking water.

The city's Druid Lake reservoir is also [clouded with particles](#) that can carry viruses, bacteria, or parasites. Officials are now embarking on a [\\$140 million project](#) to bring the reservoir up



Water in Dos Palos, California has toxic chemicals linked to cancer and kidney problems.



Like Texas, California has a statewide [water sanitation problem](#). At least one water supplier in 38 of California's 58 counties violates state water standards.

Many Central Valley cities have been hit hard by the [California drought](#), which dried up wells and prompted excessive groundwater pumping that leached toxic levels of arsenic into the water supply.

In the city of Dos Palos, residents have [switched over to bottled water](#) after it was discovered that [their water supply contained trihalomethanes](#), a group of chemicals that's been linked to kidney problems and increased cancer risk. From 2013 to 2018, [the city's well failed](#) at least 22 safety tests.

Charleston, West Virginia, is still recovering from a massive chemical spill.



A Freedom Industries facility leaked MCHM into the Elk River. Jerry Pennington/Shutterstock

In 2014, residents of Charleston, West Virginia, noticed the smell of licorice wafting through their city. The odor hailed from a massive spill of MCHM, a chemical foam that's used to wash coal. If the chemical is inhaled or comes in contact with skin, it could cause [vomiting or irritation](#) such as itching or burning.

As late as 2017, officials [continued to express concern](#) about the safety of the city's drinking water. That same year, the nonprofit Environmental Working Group [found multiple contaminants](#) in the city's water supply.



The city of Newburgh in upstate New York declared a state of emergency over contaminated water.

A sign points the way to blood testing for PFOS in Newburgh, New York. Mike Groll/AP Images

In 2016, a 1.3 billion-gallon reservoir in Newburgh, New York, tested positive for a



The discovery of PFOS prompted Newburgh to [declare a state of emergency](#) in 2016. The city has since installed a new filtration system, but residents are concerned that the [only way to obtain safe drinking water](#) is to have the reservoir cleaned up.

Tap water in Miami, Florida contains "forever chemicals" called PFAS.



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Pump stations at Miami Beach. Kevin Loria

PFAS, whose full name is per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, is a category of chemicals developed in the 1940s to resist heat, grease, stains, and water. They can linger in water and air for thousands of years, so consuming or inhaling them means they could stay in the body for life — hence their nickname, "forever chemicals."

The nonprofit Environmental Working Group (EWG) recently [tested for PFAS in the tap water](#) of 44 different communities across 31 states. Miami had one of the highest concentrations: 57 parts per trillion.

The EPA's general limit for drinking-water contaminants is 70 parts per trillion, but environmental groups have expressed concern that the limit is too high when it comes to PFAS. (The nonprofit EWG [endorses a limit](#) of one part per trillion.)

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