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Waging the water-bottle battle

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

When we drink water, what's the real message in the bottle?

Activists, governments and the bottled-water industry have engaged in a giant water fight for the past two years, extensively reported by the media. By now, many consumers know that the mass marketing of water in single-use bottles has environmental consequences, and that some reusable water bottles may pose health risks.

But at this time of year, when our bodies especially need water, many of us still find ourselves confused about the safest, greenest ways to drink it. Today we'll satisfy the thirst for answers as we address common consumer questions about water bottles.

Q: Are single-use water bottles really so evil?

A: The production, packaging and shipping of bottled water consumes enormous amounts of resources and contributes to global warming.



BERNADETTE TUAZON / AP

Sure, water is good for us, but sometimes the delivery methods aren't so good for the planet.

Water resources

Consumer Reports — water articles: www.greenerchoices.org/pcategories.cfm?pcat=food

Seattle Public Utilities drinking-

water report: www.seattle.gov/util/waterqualityreport

Mayo Clinic — water needs: www.mayoclinic.com/health/water/NU00283

Waste from the plastic bottles piles up as well, since fewer than 20 percent of single-use water bottles get recycled.

Consumers also have a strong financial incentive to avoid bottled water. In Seattle, bottled water costs an average of 2,700 times as much as tap water, according to a study for the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

This doesn't mean we should vilify bottled-water drinkers ("the new smokers," as British writer Giles Coren calls them). After all, drinking bottled water is healthier than consuming soft drinks, coffee or other beverages. It's also better for the environment than those other beverages, since bottled water takes fewer resources to produce. But the fact remains that tap water is a much greener, cheaper option than bottled water.

Responding to the recent wave of criticism, bottled-water companies have reduced the plastic in bottles, launched recycling promotions and begun buying carbon offsets to mitigate global-warming impacts.

While these efforts reduce the industry's footprint, the greenest approach for consumers is still to drink less water in single-use bottles.

Q: Don't reusable bottles have problems, too?

A: In recent years, some of the most popular reusable bottles have been those attractive, brightly colored, transparent bottles, often the Nalgene brand. Made of hard polycarbonate plastic (usually labeled #7 on the bottom), they contain a chemical called bisphenol A (BPA). Animal studies have linked BPA to hormonal problems and diseases. In addition to water bottles, BPA is used in polycarbonate baby bottles and in the linings of many food cans.

The plastics industry insists that low doses of BPA pose no health risks, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration agrees. Public and media interest in this issue has remained strong, however, and the Canadian government recently announced it would ban BPA in baby bottles. In April, Nalgene said it would phase out production of BPA water bottles "in response to consumer demand." Many retailers have already stopped carrying them.

Potential leaching of BPA from polycarbonate bottles may occur especially when bottles are old or heated. If you continue to use your polycarbonate bottle, you should not fill it with hot beverages, leave it too long in the sun or put it in the dishwasher.

Q: So which reusable bottle is best?

A: It doesn't make much difference which type of reusable bottle you choose, as long as it has no BPA. Pick a bottle that meets your drinking needs — the right size and look, the type of spout and handle you like, and a wide mouth if you sometimes add ice.

If you're considering a bottle made of hard, colored plastic, make sure it says "BPA-free" (it may be labeled #7, or not have a number). You will also find less-flashy reusable bottles made from these types of plastic: #2 (high-density polyethylene), #4 (low-density polyethylene) or # 5 (polypropylene). None of these has BPA.

Some folks prefer the new-generation stainless-steel and aluminum reusable bottles, though they usually cost more. The most popular aluminum bottle, Sigg, has an epoxy coating inside that the company says is BPA-free. Plastic-lined aluminum bottles could contain BPA. Many local stores carry an assortment of reusable bottles, with REI boasting an especially large selection.

Q: Can't I just refill a single-use bottle?

A: Nearly all single-use water bottles are #1 plastic (polyethylene terephthalate, or PET). Some studies have suggested they could leach chemicals over time, though the plastics industry disputes this. Several experts recommend against reusing PET bottles because their narrow necks make them hard to wash out, and bacteria can accumulate.

Q: Should I filter my water at home?

A: Most local tap water comes from watersheds in the Cascade Mountains and is considered some of the best in the country. If you have concerns about tap water, consider the affordable, widely available filtering systems such as Brita or Pur, which attach to the kitchen tap or come with a special pitcher. Keep in mind that many brands of bottled water, including top-selling Aquafina and Dasani, are just filtered tap water.

Q: So how much water do I really need to drink every day?

A: This varies for everyone, depending on your health, exercise and other factors, according to the Mayo Clinic. Several recent studies indicate that some people may not need the traditional recommendation of eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day.

The best advice: Be careful not to get dehydrated, choose water often instead of other beverages and

remember that your individual water choices can make a big splash.

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