

**Cycling Q & A:  
December 2005**

**QUESTION:**

Is bottled water better than tap water?

**ANSWER:**

Look behind the pictures and names. Glacier Clear Water, for example, doesn't come from a glacial source, but a municipal water supply—tap water, in other words—in Tennessee. That might look like Mt. Everest on the bottle of Everest Water, but inside is treated municipal water from somewhere in Texas. The story is similar for Aquafina and Dasani. Even when bottled water is not tap water, the rules are loose enough that “spring” water may actually come from wells or aquifers. Some bottled waters do come from mountain springs or glacial sources, but they are a minority. Many people, suspicious of tap water, buy bottled because they think it's more natural, purer, more healthful, and better tasting. But the facts usually prove otherwise.

**Who is watching?** Tap water is strictly regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and monitored by municipal suppliers. Bottled water, in contrast, is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) only if it is shipped across state lines or is imported. In some ways the FDA standards are weaker than the EPA's, and its testing far less frequent. In any case, most bottled water is packaged and sold within one state, so it's subject only to state regulation, which varies greatly—and in some states is nonexistent. California has some of the strictest regulations.

**Nutritional benefits?** Only “mineral water” (a tiny part of the bottled-water business) has extra nutrients, and even these minerals don't add up to much. Tap water does usually have one important nutrient seldom found in the bottles—fluoride, which is added to most supplies to reduce cavities in children. Bottlers generally filter out the fluoride from municipal water.

**The environment.** If you care about conservation of resources, tap water is by far the better choice. More than a million tons of plastic is used every year to make water bottles. It takes lots of energy to make, ship, and refrigerate the bottles—and energy production creates air pollution. Most of the plastic, which is not biodegradable, ends up clogging our landfills.

**Words to the wise:** If you have questions about your drinking water or water filters, consult the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), [Natural Resources Defense Council](#); or [NSF International](#). Or go to the [Subscriber's Corner](#).

