



High bacterial rates found in bottled water

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More than 70 per cent of bottled water samples from Canada contain bacterial rates that far exceed recommended limits in the U.S., according to a study presented Tuesday at the general meeting of the American Society of Microbiology in San Diego.

"Heterotrophic bacteria counts in some of the bottles were found to be in revolting figures of 100 times more than the permitted limit," said Sonish Azam, a researcher on the study. Heterotrophic bacteria are a category which includes all bacteria that survive by consuming organic matter.

Montreal-based C-crest Laboratories Inc. conducted the research after a company employee complained of a foul taste and illness after drinking some bottled water.

The U.S. bacterial limit is no more than 500 colony-forming units of bacteria per millimetre of water. The Canadian test samples showed results of more than 50,000 heterotrophic units.

Health Canada hasn't set a safe bacterial limit for bottled water.

Researchers from the lab gathered samples of several major brands of bottled water from Montreal stores and tested the bacterial levels.

They also tested samples of Canadian tap water and found the levels around 170 colony-forming units per millimetre of water well below what was found in the bottled water.

"Despite having the cleanest tap water, a large number of Canadians are switching over to bottled water for their daily hydration requirements," said Azam. "Unsurprisingly, the consumer assumes that since bottled water carries a price tag, it is purer and safer than most tap water."

Azam said the bacteria likely don't cause disease, and the study did not confirm the presence of disease-causing bacteria in the water. Still, she cautioned that the bacteria could pose a risk to vulnerable people such as infants, pregnant women, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems.

The researchers are calling for limits on the amount of bacteria allowed in Canadian drinking water.

C-crest offers product analysis and consulting services to the drug- and food-manufacturing industries.

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