

FOR THE GREATEST GOOD DISCUSSION GUIDE

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *FOR THE GREATEST GOOD*

DISTRIBUTION OF DRINKING WATER IN THE UNITED STATES

OVERVIEW

The majority of Americans receive drinking water through a public water system. These systems draw up water from sources such as lakes, rivers, reservoirs, wells, and aquifers and then transport it to a treatment facility through a complex system of pipes. Treatment facilities filter the water, remove large debris, and add disinfectants such as chlorine to kill bacteria. At this stage, any contaminants that are harmful to human health should be removed. Treated water is then distributed to individual households, schools, hospitals, and businesses through another underground pipe system.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH DRINKING WATER QUALITY

When a treatment system is operating properly, you can generally trust the quality of water that comes out of your tap. Occasionally, however, problems with treatment and distribution may occur. Polluted source water can make it challenging for outdated treatment facilities to remove chemicals or kill bacteria, while old pipes can inadvertently contribute contaminants such as lead into drinking water. Residents who consume water that is not properly treated can experience health effects such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting, cancer, or even death. Studies show that marginalized communities are more likely to receive drinking water that doesn't meet state and federal standards.

WAYS TO HELP

1. Dispose of waste properly to reduce pollution of source water
2. Limit usage of fertilizers and pesticides
3. To help conserve water, take shorter showers and don't leave the sink running while brushing your teeth

4. Contact your local representatives to advocate for stronger water quality legislation
5. Educate your friends and family about water quality issues
6. Get involved! Many states, counties, and even towns have organizations focused on improving water quality. At the national and international levels, groups such as Clean Water Action, the US Water Alliance, WaterAid, and Water For People have a long history of advocating for safe drinking water.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the United States, the majority of people receive drinking water through public systems, but a small percentage (about 10-15%) receive water from private wells. These wells are often located in a homeowner's backyard and are not under direct state or federal regulation. What do you think are the benefits and potential drawbacks of sourcing water from a private well?
2. Most drinking water is derived from rivers, lakes, reservoirs, and underground aquifers. How might impending changes in climate affect the availability and quality of water from these sources?
3. Many drinking water quality issues we experience today are due to decisions made decades ago by people who might not have even been living in the affected towns. For example, chemical companies have historically dumped harmful substances into rivers, contaminating the source water of towns several miles away. Given the broad-scale and long-lasting nature of environmental issues, what do you think can currently be done to clean up source water? What role do you think the government should play in regulating drinking water?
4. Research how your local town receives and treats water. How does it differ from the process outlined above? Is your town experiencing issues with water quality?
5. In *For the Greatest Good*, Gavin and his community consider many different methods of raising awareness for their water quality issues. What are some ways you would help advocate for change within your hometown?