

Study: Some tap water bad for pregnant women

WASHINGTON — Millions of Americans have been drinking tap water contaminated with chemical byproducts from chlorine that are at levels unsafe for consumption by pregnant women, two environmental groups say.

When chlorine is added to water that contains organic matter, such as runoff from farms or lawns, it can form compounds such as chloroform that can cause illness. A study released Tuesday, 8 January, by the Environmental Working Group (EWG) and Public Interest Research Groups, said women drinking water containing some of the byproducts may be vulnerable to health risks including miscarriage, neural tube defects and reduced fetal growth, the Associated Press (AP) reported.

By failing to clean up rivers and reservoirs that provide drinking water for Americans, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Congress have forced water utilities to chlorinate water that is contaminated with animal waste, sewage, fertilizer, algae and sediment, the report says, according to AP.

Jane Houlihan, EWG research director, said pregnant women need to drink plenty of water, but they can reduce their exposure to potential risks through simple measures such as home filters and purchasing bottled water, the news service said.

But C.T. Howlett Jr., executive director of the Chlorine Chemistry Council, said government agencies found no compelling link between reproductive hazards and chlorinated water, AP reported. He said chlorine has been added to drinking water for more than a century, and the study might unnecessarily alarm the public.

EPA spokeswoman Catherine C. Milbourn said the agency has standards in place for these byproducts and has set even stricter standards in 2002 that local water providers are beginning to implement. She said EPA has an ongoing health research program to provide scientific insight into the potential risks posed by disinfection byproducts, the news service reported.

The environmental groups said they combed water quality records in 29 states and the District of Columbia and matched them with various research into birth defects and miscarriages conducted by state and federal agencies and universities, AP said.

The groups said the places statistically most at risk due to chlorination byproducts were those that are populous, lacked buffers from urban sprawl and were downstream from agricultural sites, said AP. But women in small towns generally face twice the risk from drinking high levels of the byproducts, Houlihan said. Matching high rates doesn't prove the environmental risk caused the health problems, however. Also, the results are limited because, among other reasons, such health records do not exist in some states, the news service said.