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Survey finds drugs in drinking water

Even tiny amounts worry some scientists

BY JEFF DONN, MARTHA MENDOZA
AND JUSTIN FRITCHARD
ASSOCIATED PRESS

A vast array of pharmaceuticals, including antibiotics, anti-convulsants, mood stabilizers and sex hormones, have been found in the drinking water supplies of at least 41 million Americans, an Associated Press investigation shows.

The concentrations of these pharmaceuticals are tiny, measured in quantities of parts per billion or trillion. Also, utilities insist their water is safe.

But the presence of so many prescription drugs, and over-the-counter medicines like acetaminophen and ibuprofen, in so much of our drinking water is heightening worries among scientists of long-

term consequences to human health.

In the course of a five-month inquiry, the AP discovered that drugs have been detected in the drinking water supplies of 24 major metropolitan areas including Las Vegas.

How do the drugs get into the water?

People take pills. Their bodies absorb some of the medication, but the rest of it passes through and is flushed down the toilet. The wastewater is treated before it is discharged into reservoirs, rivers or lakes. Then, some of the water is cleaned again at drinking water treatment plants and piped to consumers. But most treatments do not remove all drug residue.

And while researchers do not yet understand the exact risks from decades of persistent exposure to random combinations of low levels of pharmaceuticals, recent studies have found alarming effects on human cells and wildlife.

"We recognize it is a growing concern and we're taking it very seriously," said

Benjamin H. Grumbles, assistant administrator for water at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Here are some of the key test results obtained by the AP:

- Officials in Philadelphia said testing there discovered 56 pharmaceuticals or byproducts in treated drinking water, including medicines for pain, infection, high cholesterol, asthma, epilepsy, mental illness and heart problems. Sixty-three pharmaceuticals or byproducts were found in the city's watersheds.

- A sex hormone was detected in San Francisco's drinking water.

Many independent scientists are skeptical that trace concentrations ultimately will prove to be harmful to humans. There's growing concern in the scientific community, though, that certain drugs, or combinations of drugs, might harm humans over decades because water, unlike most specific foods, is consumed in sizable amounts every day.