

BY MAX ALEXANDER

Keeping It Pure

Water filters protect against a range of hazards, from bacteria to heavy metals

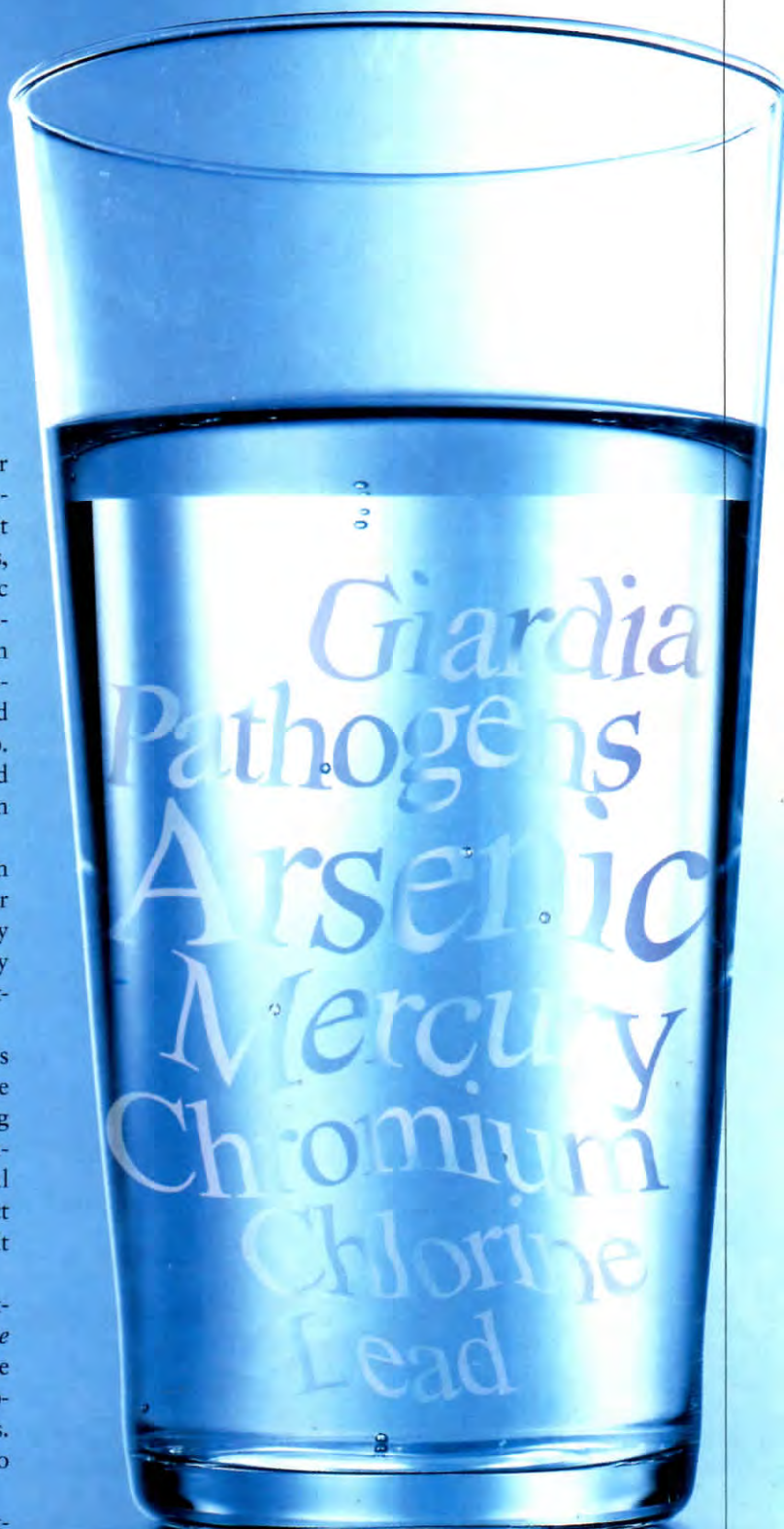
Last year Americans spent about \$4 billion on water filtration, from \$20 activated-carbon carafes to whole-house reverse-osmosis purifiers costing thousands of dollars. These systems protect against a wide range of hazards: chemical toxins like benzene and nitrates, *E. coli* and other biological contaminants, and metals such as arsenic (a known carcinogen) and lead (associated with central nervous system disorders). But safety isn't the only reason home filter use is on the rise—up 66 percent since 1995, according to industry data. “People have gotten used to the filtered taste of bottled water,” explains David Krupinski, residential products manager at Ohio filter-maker Kinetico. Faucet-mounted or under-sink filters can eliminate chlorine odors and off tastes, which means homeowners can get the same quality drink from their taps as from a bottle, for a lot less money in the long run.

That's not to say that contamination isn't a concern, especially in homes that rely on wells for their water supply. While public water systems, which serve 85 percent of the nation's residences, are tested daily or even hourly for safety, no such protections exist for private wells. They can be subject to impurities from agricultural runoff, pesticides, and naturally occurring contaminants like arsenic and radium.

So whether your motivation is safety or aesthetics, the first step is to have your water tested (see “Testing the Water,” page TK.) “Take the time to find out what's in your water supply, so you know you're getting a system that can address those issues,” says Cheryl Luptowski, consumer affairs specialist at NSF International (formerly the National Sanitation Foundation), which verifies filter claims and ensures product safety. “Also, make sure you get a system with the right capability. It could be too small to treat all of the contaminants.”

Or too large. “Unless you have minerals that are staining your fixtures, you don't really need to filter toilet water,” says *This Old House* plumbing and heating expert Richard Trethewey. “In my house, I have an activated-carbon filter under the kitchen sink. It's hooked up to a separate spigot for the water we use to make iced tea or drinks for the kids. And don't forget to run the icemaker feed off it. What good is it to have filtered water and use ice cubes made from the bad stuff?”

Whether you opt for an under-sink cartridge (also called a point-of-use system) or a more advanced whole-house (point-of-entry) setup, the biggest hit to your wallet over time will be the replacement filters. The best way to compare prices is to check the annual cost of filter replacement, based on the manufacturer's claimed life.



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