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On Your Next Flight, Don't Drink the Coffee, Tea or Unbottled Water: Cameron on Transportation

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You should never drink coffee or tea prepared on an airplane: You may get very sick.

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That's the bottom line, according to [recent studies](#) by Hunter College's NYC Food Safety Center about the safety of airplanes' water tanks, which, it turns out, can be harboring some nasty contaminants such as E. coli. <https://darienite.com> suggests you shouldn't even wash your hands in on-board water.

Airlines are only required to flush and clean their on-board water tanks four times a year. But when they fly to exotic destinations and get serviced between flights, they take on local water, which may not meet U.S. standards. The tanks are not emptied or cleaned, just [topped-off](#), leaving the nasty stuff at the bottom. And those tanks can often sit long periods (think overnight) between fillings.

The airlines say there isn't time between flights to do more than clean the cabin, off-load and load baggage and get their expensive jets back in the air, making money.

Back in 2011, the EPA instituted the Airline Drinking Water Rule (ADWR), which was to “ensure that safe and reliable drinking water is provided to aircraft passengers and crew.” But a year later, [1 in 10 aircraft](#) tested still showed signs of coliform.

[Coliform](#) itself won't make you sick, but it's often a sign of other dangerous bacteria lurking in your drinks: viruses, protozoa and multicellular parasites.

Some airlines, like Southwest, which has one of the best water safety records, disinfects its tanks with ozone. But while OCD flyers may swab their seatback tables with disinfectant wipes, there's not much they can know (or do) about those hidden water tanks — or your fellow passengers spewing germs into the recirculated air. Maybe you should bring a surgical mask, too?

It's also not very reassuring to learn that the EPA has rarely, if ever, levied a fine against those airlines failing inspections. Even airlines failing quarterly water sample tests don't have to shut down their water use for 24 hours. Huh?

The Hunter College study ranked the top-10 domestic airlines' water safety. Top scores for the cleanest water went to Alaska and Allegiant with scores of 3.3 on a scale of 5. The major carriers like Delta, American and United received scores of 1.6, 1.5 and 1.2, respectively. At the bottom of the rankings, with scores of just 1, were JetBlue and Spirit.

You absolutely need to hydrate, especially on longer flights, but you should either BYO bottled water or drink the airlines' water distributed in flight, but only if it's bottled. That coffee or tea you're offered in-flight is not made with bottled water. Plus, the caffeine in tea or coffee only dehydrates you further.

On the railroads, I can remember the olden days when rail passengers could get water from a cooler in each car, quaffing their thirst with tiny, triangular paper cups dispensed next to the spigots. Not anymore. Amtrak even reminds passengers [not to drink restroom sink water](#).

On Metro-North, there are no water spigots, though each train does carry [emergency “boxed” water](#) in case of a breakdown and lengthy delays. But even those supplies have a five-year safety limit.

Bottom line: Don't be paranoid, but do be safe. Bring your own water, even if it means carrying an empty

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bottle through TSA for filling at a water fountain.

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