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Water on the brain

Posted by [Paul Mulshine](#) January 20, 2008 10:46AM

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I recently bought a case of one- pint cans of Bitburger beer at the local liquor store. To manufacture it, some industrious German had to boil vast amounts of spring barley in water. He then had to add Perle, Hallertau, Mittelfruh and Tettnang hops. Then after aging it for several weeks, he had to put the result in a can. Then it had to be put on a ship to Newark. After that it had to be trucked to my local liquor store.

Yet the entire case of 24 cans cost a mere \$18.99. That's 79 cents a pint.

On the way home I stopped by the drugstore. The cooler was filled with pint-sized bottles of water. To manufacture that, some American had to turn on a tap, wait till the bottle was full, and then turn off the tap. Yet it cost \$1.29.

For that \$1.29, you could get 4,000 pints of water from your kitchen faucet. Yet people willingly pay a premium for a bottle filled with a product that is worth just a fraction of a cent more than the air that will fill that bottle when the water is gone.

What accounts for this depravity? Journalists are partly to blame. We have perpetuated the myth that people should drink eight glasses of water a day. A search of newspaper databases reveals hundreds of articles in which the reader is told that drinking eight glasses of water a day will aid vision, promote weight loss, improve skin tone, help the pancreas and perform various other miracles.

This is obvious nonsense. There are no studies that show that drinking eight glasses of water a day has any special health value whatsoever, nor would it be possible to conduct such a study. So I was glad to read recently that the "eight glasses of water" myth had been debunked by some medical researchers at Indiana University.

"There's no magic to a glass of water," says Aaron Carroll, one of two physicians who recently put out a paper attacking that and other health myths. "It wasn't based on hard science. How much water you need depends on where you live."

And the main question in that regard, says Carroll, is "whether you live in the desert or not." If you're out there in the Mojave under 120-degree heat, water is crucial. Otherwise, says Carroll, the rule is simple: "If you're not thirsty, you shouldn't drink."

What's worse, drinking too much water can kill you.

"It dilutes your sodium so much that you actually have increased pressure on your brain," he said.

That happened recently to that unfortunate woman who drank excessive water in a promotion by a radio station. And it happens now and then to marathon runners who make the mistake of taking that advice about gulping more water than they need.

Carroll and his research partner, Rachel Vreeman, trace the myth's origins to a 1945 recommendation from the Nutrition Council that you should consume the equivalent of eight glasses of fluid a day. Soda, fruit juice, coffee and tea are fluids as well. But once the bottled-water industry got into the act the advice evolved into a notion that only pure water would do. This makes no sense, but people believe it.

"People are bad at understanding risk," he said. "They don't know what is a real danger and what is not."

That applies to another myth about water, one that I have heard from various exercise "experts" over the years. This is the idea that people who drink beer instead of water after exercising are somehow risking dehydration. I have read this in dozens of newspapers and magazines, even from people who should know better, such as the doctors who write for the magazine The Physician and Sportsmedicine.

"Beer is a poor choice for rehydrating after exercise or competition," read a typical article. "Its diuretic effect sends athletes running for the bathroom."

No, it doesn't. Why do doctors repeat those claims?

"Doctors are people, too," said Carroll. "Some of these things are things you were told when you were young. We heard it before, and we just keep perpetuating the same story."

Recently a Spanish researcher, Manuel Garzon of Granada University, decided to test this popular wisdom. Garzon had students do a strenuous workout in hot weather. Afterward, one group drank beer and the other drank water. The beer drinkers actually managed to get a bit more water into their systems than the control group, Garzon discovered. In other words, you can't dehydrate yourself while drinking a liquid that is 90 percent water.

I could have predicted that without doing the study. I've been going to bars since 1969, and I have never yet seen anyone keel over from dehydration. It could happen though, so in the spirit of science I will continue my research.

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COMMENTS (4)

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Posted by **nohesitation** on [01/21/08 at 11:58AM](#)

Mulshine - with you on the absurd cost of bottled water and the myths you expose.

But, want to add a few thoughts:

1) those damn plastic water bottles are a major problem - the plastic is energy intensive (made from oil) - this causes pollution in manufacture. When you sum up the life-cycle pollution from the manufacture and distribution and the volume of these bottles sold, this is a considerable problem. And then you need to consider disposal costs and impacts - then there is the litter issue: I hate to see them floating in the water, on the beach, forming dams in local streams and storm drains, out in the woods, or just about everywhere..

So, what I propose, is a 50 cent per bottle fee to pay to clean all this crap up adn reduce the number of these things puchased.

2. True story on drinking beer after exercise (one of my favorite research projects) - it may not cause dehydration, but I think it gave me kidney stones. I ride my bike - there just happen to be a lot of great pubs along the way, which I visit. Did an intense summer of roadbike pub visits adn got kidney stones.

3. True story on drinking too much water - suffering from the myth of "hydrate or die", I played golf with my son a few years ago on a 100 degree high humidity day (heat index was 116). I hydrated before tee off and drank almost a quart of water per hole. After 5 hours of slow play, I ended up passing out on and had to be ambulated off the 16th tee from heat stroke and electrolyte imbalance. All that water drove my electrolytes to near deadly levels, so yes, water can kill.

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Posted by **blarneyboy** on [01/21/08 at 3:13PM](#)

Where are you getting the Bitburger that chaep?

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Posted by **hg lindquist** on [01/21/08 at 6:08PM](#)

ah, blarneyboy ... you do know how to make a grown man weep ...

I have allergy to something in beer ... inflames my gastrointestinal tract ... and here you're ping-ponging with Mulshine over the price of a good beer right in front of me?*wink*

But tip of the hat to Mr. Mulshine ... I used this water stuff in another comment on another thread. I read it in the print copy long before it was posted here ... (longer to get here than usual for some reason ... but who am I to raise anything about "length" as an issue?)

Anyway ... just thought I would toss this wee comment in in testimony to my being a HUGE fan of Mr. Mulshine as a nationally syndicated conservative opinion columnist for The Star-Ledger in New Jersey. (I'd use "Paul" more but I don't want people to get him confused with the candidate, Ron Paul)

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Posted by **unctnwz** on [01/22/08 at 10:08PM](#)

On drinking all that water ... you forgot to mention fish function in it.

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