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Most beers sold in the United States found to contain PFAS chemicals

Study links beer contamination to municipal water sources and calls for improved treatment to protect consumer health

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Scientists have detected PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals,” in the vast majority of commercial beers sold in the United States. A recent study published in Environmental Science & Technology found that 95 percent of the beers tested contained these persistent synthetic substances, which are known for their resistance to breaking down in the environment and their potential links to health problems.

The research team, led by Jennifer Hoponick Redmon, director of research at RTI International, analyzed 23 different beers produced by breweries across various regions of the country. The selection included beers from areas with documented PFAS contamination in local water supplies, as well as popular national and international brands with less clear water sources. The scientists adapted a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) method for detecting PFAS in drinking water to test the beer samples.

PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, are widely used for their water-, oil-, and stain-repellent properties. They have been found in surface water, groundwater, and municipal water systems throughout the United States and globally. While many breweries use filtration and water treatment systems, these are not typically designed to remove PFAS.

The study found a strong correlation between PFAS levels in municipal drinking water and those found in locally brewed beer. This connection had not previously been studied in retail beer sold in the U.S. Among the chemicals detected were perfluorooctanesulfonate (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), both of which now have recently established EPA exposure limits for drinking water due to health concerns.

Beers brewed near the Cape Fear River basin in North Carolina showed the highest concentrations and most diverse mix of PFAS compounds. This region is already known for significant PFAS contamination in its water supply. The findings suggest that contamination from a single source can spread into other products, including beverages like beer.

Hoponick Redmon said she was motivated by her own curiosity as an occasional beer drinker about whether PFAS present in water could end up in beer. She hopes these results will encourage new strategies and policies for water treatment that reduce the likelihood of PFAS appearing in future beverages.

The researchers are calling for greater awareness among brewers, consumers, and regulators about the presence of PFAS in beer. They also highlight the need for improved water treatment at breweries, especially as regulations on PFAS in drinking

water evolve or as municipal systems upgrade their treatment processes.

The study’s findings raise questions about how widespread PFAS contamination may be affecting other food and beverage products that rely on municipal water sources. As regulatory agencies continue to address PFAS exposure limits and treatment standards, breweries may need to consider additional steps to ensure their products remain safe for consumers.