

Mountain water may look clear, but don't trust it

By Sammy Caiola, Sacramento Bee

Last winter's Sierra snowpack is melting fast in the summer sun, and backcountry streams are running high. Thirsty hikers may be tempted to gulp from the alpine springs, but experts say look out – the clear mountain water could be full of microscopic organisms just waiting to wreak havoc on your stomach.

Wilderness water can contain disease-causing agents such as giardia, E. coli and salmonella. The higher up and more remote the water is, the less likely it is to be contaminated by human and animal waste, but it's always a good idea to treat natural water before drinking it, experts said.

Parasites, viruses and bacteria from feces can make their way into the watershed and lurk, invisible, until hikers slurp them up. Outdoor stores sell dozens of water filters and chemical treatments that are easy to carry and will keep you safe from water critters. When you're shopping, look for products that block bacteria and parasites, such as giarda and cryptosporidium. If it removes viruses that's even better, said Maggie Brandenburg, outdoor and youth programs manager for the Tahoe Rim Trail Association.

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