St. Cloud residents have gotten some important news in the mail lately. It was not a quote from the gecko. It was not a rebate check. It was the results of a checkup.

The water doctors at the treatment plant have the water tested frequently to be sure it meets the EPA's drinking water standards and is not harmful to our health. It is similar to getting a check up at your doctor's office.

You go in for your physical, they send tests off to the lab and wait for the results. You think everything is ok, but when you meet again with the doctor for a consultation, you find that your cholesterol is higher than it should be. You look at the results and it is the same range it has been for a few years so you think all is well. Then you find out that research in the medical community results in changed recommendations and your "same old" level is now too high for the new rules. The doctor recommends a few changes and you are back on target. And you get a bill for the wonderful news.

A similar scenario has happened with the City water treatment system. The EPA has lowered the allowable levels of some drinking water contaminants and altered the requirements for where samples were to be collected. When the city got the latest test results back, the results were found to be in violation of the new rule. The process didn't change. The level of treatment or the way the water is treated to purify it didn't change, but the rules did.

Even though the treatment process is exactly the same as it has been for years, the levels of some contaminants in the water as compared to the new standards sent warning flags to the water doctor, the city engineer for utilities, Todd Swingle. It turns out that according to the new lower standards, there have been more of some contaminants, trihalomethanes, than there should be. Trihalomethanes (TTHM's) are chemical byproducts from the chlorination process of water treatment.

In Osceola County, public and private drinking water comes from wells, deep pipes into the underground water reservoir called an aquifer. In other parts of the country, drinking water may come from a river or a lake. Most municipal treatment plants locally use chlorine to purify our public drinking water supply. Many families with private drinking water wells where municipal water is not available may also use chlorination for water purification but rarely are they tested to determine the TTHM levels.

TTHM's are regulated in drinking water since elevated levels over a prolonged period of time may result in health issues related to kidney, liver or central nervous system problems as well as increased risk of cancer. This does not mean that you will get these problems if you drink the water, however, it is recommended that individuals with compromised immune systems should speak to their physician about their concerns. Seniors, young children, cancer patients and those with autoimmune disorders should consult their physician for recommendations and the city advises their customers by mail of these concerns as well as the actions being taken to correct the problem.

For those people who have concerns in the mean time, you still need to drink and cook with water, so what are the options? You may choose to buy bottled water or select a home treatment system. Neither are as inexpensive as using good quality centrally treated water from the tap. Central systems can provide a hundred gallons of safe drinking water for approximately 10 cents. Compare that with the price of bottled water at $2.00 each in some places. That is nearly $12 per gallon by the individual serving for convenience.

You may want to check with the bottled water company for a similar type of report on their water quality. In Florida, the bottled water industry is regulated by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Call 1-850-245-5520 for more information.

According to University of Florida water quality experts, two methods of reducing TTHM's include reverse osmosis and carbon filtration. Carbon or charcoal filtration requires maintenance, so follow manufacturers directions regarding how often to change the canister.
Our University of Florida/IFAS Extension staff is available to help you better understand water quality issues and explain some of your water treatment options. Call Eleanor Foerste, Natural Resources Agent at 321-697-3000.

NSF International provides a voluntary third party testing on many home drinking water systems so you can find out if a product you are considering will reduce the contaminants you are most concerned about. You can contact them at 1-800-673-8010 or check the extensive information on their website at www.nsf.org. Whether selecting a faucet, countertop, pitcher or undercounter system, look on the label for NSF/ANSI standard 53 for reduction of THM's or VOCs. There are no NSF approved whole house systems or systems for hot water.

The City is committed to getting the system fixed. In order to reduce future potential for problems with TTHM's, they have selected an option other than chlorination for their new water plant. Unfortunately, the change in EPA standards came before the new plant is on line. Residents should not act out of fear, but should carefully evaluate their family's risk with a physician and do some research before making a major financial investment in a home treatment system.

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