



What's in the water?

More people complaining about adverse reactions to municipal water

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When Robert Falla shared his story about how his skin reacted when it came into contact with the local water supply, he wondered if he was all alone.

He wasn't.

As the calls came flooding into his Waterloo home from people who read his story in the Feb. 25 edition of the Chronicle, they were all complaining about the same thing — mysterious skin problems after they had come into contact with the local water.

They were describing the same symptoms that Falla had experienced for the last nine months as his skin crawled and a red, itchy rash broke on his hands and other parts of his body. Those symptoms grew worse after coming into contact with the municipal water supply.

After exhausting all the medical reasons behind what might have caused the condition, Falla, who lives right next door to a municipal water tower, started to wonder if there was something in the water.

So far he's been unsatisfied with the answers he's received from local water officials, who have done some initial testing. While the early results indicated that he had slightly elevated chloramine levels in his home, the results still measured within safe, acceptable provincial standards.

However, he still hasn't received an answer about the fluoride levels in his home. That chemical is added to Waterloo's water supply.

The question of continuing water fluoridation in Waterloo will be addressed in a plebiscite that will be held during the municipal elections in the fall of 2010.

Until then, Falla is wondering if he has to pay for some of that expensive water testing himself for his own piece of mind.

"I've had no contact with the city since (the Chronicle story)," said Falla.

"As far as they're concerned I think they wish this was washed away and never rears its ugly head again."

Bill Garibaldi, the manager of water services at the City of Waterloo, said although they haven't officially tested for fluoride levels at Falla's north Waterloo home, he has relied on the expert opinions of water quality experts at the Region of Waterloo who were involved with the initial testing.

"I relied on the region's water quality specialist and asked them about fluoride values and I was told that fluoride doesn't decrease in value in the system," said Garibaldi. "It doesn't decompose in the system."

Falla might have higher levels of chloramine at his home because the region is trying to ensure the same level of dosing at the end of the distribution system as the beginning, which is has been provincially mandated since the Walkerton water disaster.

Fluoride, however, doesn't degrade the same way as chlorine or chloramine so holds its concentration level throughout the system, said Garibaldi.

"As a result they could provide us with fairly good certainty the level of fluoride that Mr. Falla would be receiving," he said.



Waterloo resident Robert Falla thought he might be the only one having a skin reaction to the local water. But after his story was told in the Chronicle in February, other citizens contacted Falla with the same concerns.

When asked if the city has received a lot of complaints about people with potential reactions to the chemicals in the water, Garibaldi said nothing that he would call significant.

"If you ask whether or not we've been receiving those calls, we have not to the best of my knowledge," he said. "Certainly nothing out of the ordinary.

"We do have people complain about hard water at times, because it makes their skin itchy, but I know you're not talking about that.

"We don't receive any amount of calls with regard to chemical tolerance."

But if the city wants a list of people with complaints about their reactions to the water, Falla said he's been collecting one.

And that list keeps growing.

One of those people is Paul Forster, a resident of the Northlake Woods area of Waterloo. Forster and his wife Janice moved to the city from the Ottawa area about three years ago, and both have skin conditions since the move.

They think the symptoms might be caused by Waterloo's water.

"I've been getting these red spots on my body, mostly on my legs and arms and a little on my back and stomach," said Forster.

Forster has tried everything to alleviate the symptoms. He even applies topical creams after a doctor at a local walk-in clinic diagnosed psoriasis.

He also tried disinfecting his hot tub and replacing his water softener.

But the symptoms still persist and they get even worse when he comes in contact with the local water.

"It doesn't start like any psoriasis I've seen before," said Forster. "It's funny how it behaves.

"Whenever I have a shower I have a burning sensation on it."

While psoriasis might be a plausible explanation for his condition because of a family background, it's no explanation for why his wife has had a similar reaction with no previous history of the condition.

"My wife developed the same thing and over the last six months to a year it's been getting worse," said Forster.

The only time the couple has had any relief recently was when they went on vacation.

Forster said he didn't have to use his topical cream once in the more than two weeks he was away.

The symptoms didn't reoccur until he returned home and used the municipal water again.

"I can't say it's due to the water, but it's funny that we had the hot tub for five years and it wasn't a problem until we moved here," he said.

"I was concerned that the additional chemicals like the chloramine and fluoride might have started this off, but I can't make that allegation at this point. It's just funny that it's happened since we've been here."

Another person with questions is Paula Anstett, whose five-year-old daughter Annika has had terrible reactions to the water. The mother, who lives in the L a u relwood area of the city, said she's even watched her daughter's skin break out after putting her in the tub.

"I gave her a bath and before my eyes she got a rash," said Anstett. "I thought it can't be the water — how could it be the water?"

But through all the testing she's done with her daughter they haven't had any indication as to what is causing the allergic reaction. Anstett has since tried limiting her exposure to the water as much as possible.

"Right now we're lucky we're still in winter so that we can go without a bath everyday," said Anstett. "That's different in the summer, which kind of has me wondering what I'm going to do.

"Even mention the word bath to her and she has no desire."

That's why she contacted Falla after reading his story. And she doesn't think she's the only one in her neighbourhood with the same kind of issues.

"There are several of us moms who talk about what would appear to be eczema but it isn't going away with treatment," said Anstett. "She (Annika) isn't the only one who has issues out here.

"I can't get it to go away, and I question whether it's because I can't keep her from the water."

Falla said he doesn't accept Garibaldi's assertions that people aren't complaining about this issue in any significant numbers. "I'm not impressed with the statement that he made that it is acceptable that a small percentage of people are having problems," said Falla.

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