The Guardian

one stop english

Wash well – and don't forget the lid: how to clean your reusable water bottle

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Do you own and use a water bottle? How often do you wash it with hot water?
- Why do you think it's common for bacteria to grow on water bottles?
- Why do you think good personal hygiene is important?

2 Key words

a. Find the key words (marked in bold) in the article. Then circle the correct definition.

1. **bleach**
   a. a type of bacteria
   b. a chemical for cleaning
2. **buildup**
   a. a gradual increase
   b. a sudden decrease
3. **capful**
   a. the amount of liquid that fits in the top cover of a bottle
   b. a small cap that stops liquid from escaping
4. **contamination**
   a. the presence of harmful substances
   b. the process of removing bacteria
5. **incubator**
   a. a small plastic water bottle
   b. an environment that allows things to grow

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6. **inhibit**
   a. to prevent a process from happening
   b. to encourage the growth of something
7. **microclimate**
   a. a complex weather system
   b. a small area with distinct conditions
8. **micro-organisms**
   a. small pieces of plastic
   b. tiny living things
9. **moisture**
   a. a small amount of water
   b. dry air
10. **moot**
    a. pointless
    b. essential
11. **mould**
    a. useful bacteria that live in our bodies
    b. a fungus that typically grows in damp conditions
12. **replenished**
    a. emptied
    b. refilled

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13. **rinse**

    a. to scrub with soap

    b. to wash lightly with water

14. **saliva**

    a. liquid from the mouth

    b. sweat from the skin

15. **soap lather**

    a. the bubbles from washing with soap and water

    b. the dirt that is left after cleaning with soap and water

16. **dregs**

    a. a small amount of liquid remaining at the bottom of a cup or glass

    b. large pieces of food that get trapped in the plughole of a sink

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. The government's investment in public health became _____ when two medical centres in the area closed down due to staff shortages.
2. Despite regular cleaning, there was a significant _____ of limescale around the taps.
3. Cold temperatures can _____ bacterial growth, but don't stop it completely.
4. The _____ created by the dense vegetation allowed rare orchids to thrive.
5. Scientists discovered harmful _____ in samples taken from fish that live in the deepest parts of the ocean.
6. Forensic scientists can extract DNA from the _____ left on drinking glasses.

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7. Add one _____ of detergent per load of laundry.
8. Working the brush in circular motions creates a thick _____.
9. 9. The baby was placed in a(n) _____ for several days after her birth.
10. Industrial _____ of the river led to a ban on fishing.
11. Alice poured away the _____ in her coffee cup before helping herself to a refill.
12. _____ in the walls caused extensive damage to the Victorian property.
13. The wood must be completely dry and free of any _____ before you apply varnish.
14. You should _____ the rice thoroughly until the water runs clear.
15. The reservoir was gradually _____ after months of heavy rainfall.
16. Soak white T-shirts overnight in diluted _____ to remove stubborn stains.

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Water bottles are the 'perfect environment for bacteria to grow' – as we've seen from the horror pics on social media. Follow these steps to stay clean.

Sarah Sloat

05 January, 2026

1 Environmentally friendly and convenient, reusable water bottles are on the rise. But on social media, people seem confused about how to clean them, and post horrifying pictures of **mould** growing inside.

2 But bacteria and viruses can make their way into a water bottle via our hands and **saliva**. "The water bottle itself is just the perfect environment for bacteria to grow," says Kelly Reynolds at the University of Arizona, who studies water quality and disease transmission. "It's a little **incubator**."

3 Keeping your water bottle clean comes down to hygienic practices – but these might not be as obvious as you think. For example, in a study of 30 people, 27 regularly **replenished** their water bottles without washing or rinsing them. Here's what experts recommend.

4 **Wash your hands – and wipe down your phone:**

Before you even get to the water bottle, you should wash your hands.

5 "The source of the water bottle's **contamination** is probably your hands," says Reynolds.

6 But frequent hand washing could also be **moot** if you don't also wipe down your phone at least weekly, using a cloth slightly dampened with soap and water. Cell phones collect viruses and bacteria; some research suggests that at least 68 per cent of phones are contaminated.

7 **Wash the bottle with soap, bleach or vinegar:**

Rinsing your water bottle with just water is not enough explains Reynolds.

8 You have a few options. One is to clean the bottle either in the sink or in the dishwasher, says Reynolds. Fill the sink with water, add a **capful** of **bleach**, and let the bottle sit in the mixture for a minute or two. Then rinse your bottle thoroughly with clean water. Note: use gloves, and never mix bleach with any other product.

9 You could also use basic dishwashing soap or vinegar.

10 If you have a dishwasher, check the water bottle for the "dishwasher-safe" label first. Be aware that washing plastic in the dishwasher can release microplastics.

11 **Hot water can be better than cold:**

The difference between using cold or hot water can be minimal, but hot is generally preferred because it is better for achieving a good **soap lather** which helps the cleaning process. For very dirty bottles, a quick prewash with cold water can help loosen bacteria before using soap.

12 **Don't forget the lid, mouthpiece or straw:**

These parts are frequently the most contaminated because they can trap moisture so it can be easier for bacteria to build up. Use a bottle brush for these areas.

13 **Let the water bottle dry completely:**

Without **moisture**, bacteria have a harder time growing, Reynolds says.

14 **Wash regularly and sensibly:**

It's generally a good routine to wash and **rinse** daily. Certain conditions increase the risk of contamination, making it important to consider your habits when regularly cleaning your water bottle. For instance, leaving it in a hot environment such as your car allows bacteria to grow more quickly.

15 **If you can see or smell something, it's too late:**

Bacterial growth won't necessarily harm you immediately, but it can cause **buildup** of a slimy gel called biofilm. Biofilm can stick to surfaces like the sides of a water bottle and produce an unpleasant odour and taste. If it grows for long enough, biofilm will become visible, much like mould growing in a shower. But if you can see it, there could be millions to billions of micro-organisms, says Reynolds. Generally, it could take as little as a hundred **micro-organisms** to make you sick, she adds.

16 "If you can see or smell biofilm, you have way too much already," she explains. "That's not a hygienic situation."

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17 **Choose your bottle wisely:**

Metal and glass water bottles tend to have antibacterial properties. This means they can **inhibit** more bacterial growth and biofilm development than plastic. Regardless of the material, you must wash any water bottle regularly. "At a certain point, bacteria can grow on any material," says Reynolds.

18 **What happens if you don't clean your water bottle?**

Bacteria can easily grow in a **microclimate**, such as a water bottle. For example, under certain conditions, E. coli can double its population every 20 minutes. Reynolds and her team recently conducted a survey at a water refill station, asking people if they would allow the water in their reusable bottles to be tested. The results aren't published yet, but early analysis suggests the water from the refill station itself was clean. The **dregs** of water left in bottles? Not so much. About half of the samples were contaminated with bacteria, and 10 per cent contained E. coli.

19 In Reynolds' 2022 study analysing different water sources, E. coli was found in refillable water containers. Reusable bottles cleaned with soap and water had lower levels of E. coli than those rinsed only with water.

20 Drinking water that contains E. coli can cause symptoms like stomach pain and nausea. The risk of disease is not typically severe; still, "routine maintenance is simply good hygiene", says Reynolds.

21 It's also important to clean your water bottle if you've been sick, because you can reinfect yourself, says Reynolds. We can build immunity to some organisms, but it's still best practice to clean the bottle before reuse.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and choose T (True), F (False) or NM (Not Mentioned).

According to the article…

1. … most people wash their water bottles before refilling them. _____
2. … there is no point cleaning your hands if you don't also clean your phone. _____
3. … mixing bleach with vinegar creates a more effective cleaning solution. _____
4. … hot water is recommended mainly because it produces more soap bubbles. _____
5. … washing plastic bottles in the dishwasher can release microplastics. _____
6. … biofilm becomes dangerous only when it is visible to the naked eye. _____
7. … early results from Reynold's recent survey suggest that the water from the refill station was contaminated. _____
8. … It is recommended that you clean your water bottle after recovering from an illness to avoid a relapse. _____

4 Key language

a. Complete the table with a prefix from the box.

re micro anti pre bio non multi

Meaning	Prefix
again	1. _____
against; opposing	2. _____
before	3. _____
life; living	4. _____
many	5. _____
not; without	6. _____
very small; tiny	7. _____

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b. Complete the sentences with the word in brackets and a suitable prefix.

1. Washing synthetic clothing can release _____ (plastics) into the water supply.
2. The sheltered valley created a unique _____ (climate) where citrus trees could flourish.
3. You can _____ (fill) your water bottle at any of the water stations located around the stadium.
4. Parents often choose _____ (toxic) paints for their children's bedrooms.
5. This _____ (purpose) tool works as a screwdriver, bottle opener and knife.
6. Dental plaque is actually a type of _____ (film) that forms on teeth.
7. Most stain removers work better if you _____ (wash) the fabric first.
8. Most hospitals now have _____ (bacterial) hand gel at every entrance.
9. Our local supermarket introduced _____ (usable) tote bags to reduce plastic waste.
10. A single gram of soil can contain billions of different _____ (organisms).

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Has reading this article changed how you think about cleaning everyday items? Why or why not?
- Do you think most people are aware of the hygiene risks associated with reusable bottles? Why or why not?
- What other everyday items do you think might pose similar hygiene risks

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6 In your own words

a. Work in pairs or small groups to create an informative poster about water bottle hygiene for your school, gym or workplace.

Your poster should include:

- an interesting title
- reasons why cleaning your water bottle is important
- tips on how to clean a water bottle properly
- a warning section about what to avoid

Remember to use modals of obligation (*must/should/have to*) and prohibition (*mustn't*) and imperatives (*wash, dry, rinse*, etc) for giving instructions.

b. Present your poster to the class and explain the information you have included.