

For Want of a Cup: The Rise of Tea in England and the Impact of Water Quality on Mortality *

Francisca M. Antman[†]

Department of Economics, *University of Colorado Boulder*

January 4, 2020

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of water quality on mortality by exploiting a natural experiment—the rise of tea consumption in 18th century England. This resulted in an unintentional increase in consumption of boiled water, thereby reducing mortality rates. The methodology uses two identification strategies tying areas with lower initial water quality to larger declines in mortality rates after tea drinking became widespread and following larger volumes of tea imports. Results are robust to the inclusion of controls for income and access to trade. The hypothesis is further bolstered by evidence from cause-specific deaths and early childhood mortality.

JEL classification: N33, I15, Q25, Q56

Keywords: tea, water quality, mortality, Industrial Revolution

*I thank Marcella Alsan, David Atkin, Tania Barham, Howard Bodenhorn, Brian Cadena, Ann Carlos, Gregory Clark, Karen Clay, William Collins, Melissa Dell, Thomas Dickinson, Erica Field, Andrew Foster, Claudia Goldin, Jonathan Hughes, Lakshmi Iyer, Robert Jensen, Trevon Logan, Wolfgang Keller, Victor H. Mair, Craig McIntosh, Terra McKinnish, Nathan Nunn, Matthew Ruther, Carol Shiue, Duncan Thomas, Werner Troesken, Marianne Wanamaker, and Shuang Zhang for their feedback. Tim Larsen, Peter Graca, Isaac Kaplan, Priti Kalsi, and Eric Penner provided excellent research assistance. Seminar and conference participants at the NBER DAE Summer Institute, NBER/BREAD Development Fall Meeting, Ohio State University, Duke University, Case Western Reserve University, University of New Mexico, University of Tennessee, Broom Center for Demography Workshop, Northeast Universities Development Consortium Conference, Population Association of America annual meeting, and Western Economic Association International meeting also offered useful feedback. Any errors are my own.

[†]Contact: francisca.antman@colorado.edu, Department of Economics, University of Colorado Boulder, 256 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309.