

Americans can be clueless when it comes to water, a survey says

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Morning traffic makes its way toward downtown Los Angeles along the Hollywood Freeway past an electronic sign warning of severe drought on Feb. 14, 2014. California is taking to the highways to spread the word about water conservation after months of drought. AP Photo/Richard Vogel

A new study looked at how much water Americans think they use. It turns out we use twice the amount of water we think we do. We are particularly clueless about how much water we flush down the toilet each day.

The study also found that Americans barely know how much water goes into growing food.

Shahzeen Attari is a professor at Indiana University. She wrote the study. In general, she found people guessed their water use wrong by a lot.

One-thousand-twenty people answered questions for the survey.

The study comes at an important time. The country is in the middle of a national drought. An area from the Pacific Coast to part of the Mississippi Valley has not gotten enough rain. California has had the worst of it.

Don't Know Low-Flow Toilets

Attari wrote that most Americans figure we'll always have a lot of water. They also expect that water will be safe to use. She says that **climate change** affects that. The earth is getting hotter. Many scientists blame all the oil, gas and coal we burn. Attari believes climate change will make our supply of water less steady. It also means there's more salt in groundwater now. And rainfall is more unpredictable. These problems may mean less water for farming or drinking.

Other studies have shown that toilets use a huge amount of water. More than a quarter of water used in homes is caused by flushing. Environmental experts who work for the U.S. government want to reduce that amount. They want people put in toilets that conserve water. These are called low-flow toilets. They say this will save the most water in homes. Yet almost none of the adults in the survey realized this.

"That to me was really surprising," Attari said. "We may be underestimating how much water toilets use, because we use them frequently throughout the day."

Most toilets use about 3.5 gallons of water per flush. A low-flow toilet uses just 1.6 gallons or less.

People should also flush less often Attari says. That would also decrease the amount of water used in the home, she said. "If it's yellow, let it mellow," she recommends. Only solid waste needs to be flushed right away, she says.

Washers And Showers

Experts say the next greatest water saver is a better clothes washer. A typical washer opens from the top. Those models use about 34 gallons per load. But, a washer that opens from the front will use less than 15 gallons.

The survey asked people what one thing people could do to save the most water. Almost half got it wrong. Roughly four out of 10 people surveyed said that taking fewer, or shorter, showers would save the most water.

Attari said that taking shorter showers would help to save water. However, the savings would be less than many people think.

The average length of a shower is about 8 minutes, Attari said. So, people could take just 5 minute showers. But, that would save only about one-twelfth of your total water use in the home, she said.

Peter Gleick is a water expert. He counted how much water humans need for their basic needs. Thirteen gallons a day would be enough, he said. In 2005, the average American actually used about 98 gallons a day.

"Paying More Attention"

However, people aren't just wrong about their own use of water. They have no idea much water is used to grow food.

The survey asked respondents to guess how much water was used to produce a pound of food. They were asked about sugar, rice, cheese and coffee. Most people said it took about the same amount of water for each.

In fact, each needs vastly different amounts of water: 157 gallons were required to make a pound of sugar. A pound of rice takes 299 gallons. To make a pound of cheese takes 606 gallons. The biggest water hog is coffee. It takes 2,264 gallons to grow one pound.

“We need to start paying more attention to water just in general,” Attari said.

Quiz

- 1 Which detail makes the article's main idea important to a lot of people right now?
- (A) Most people think it takes the same amount of water to grow different food.
 - (B) Almost none of the adults in a survey realized the advantage of low-flow toilets.
 - (C) A new study just came out, and after a few months, it will not be so new anymore.
 - (D) An area from the Pacific Coast to part of the Mississippi Valley has not gotten enough rain recently.
- 2 What detail explains why taking shorter showers does not save as much water as people expect?
- (A) In 2005, the average American actually used about 98 gallons of water every day.
 - (B) Americans actually use twice the amount of water we think we do, says a new survey.
 - (C) Of the people who were asked for one thing that would help save water, almost half got it wrong.
 - (D) Taking a 5-minute shower instead of an 8-minute shower only saves around one-twelfth of home water use.
- 3 What is the main idea of the article?
- (A) Americans actually use more water than they think they do.
 - (B) Americans barely know how much water goes into growing food.
 - (C) Americans don't know how much water we flush down the toilet.
 - (D) Americans figure we'll always have safe water to use despite climate change.
- 4 What would be another title for the section "Paying More Attention"?
- (A) "Biggest Water Hog Is The Cup Of Coffee"
 - (B) "A Pound Of Sugar Takes 157 Gallons Of Water"
 - (C) "Different Foods Need Different Amounts Of Water"
 - (D) "Sugar, Rice, Cheese and Coffee Need The Same Water"