

# Study says Americans use a lot more water than they think

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.10.14

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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. Photo: AP Photo/Richard Vogel

A new study polled Americans on how much water they think they use. It found they use twice the amount of water they think they do. They appear to be particularly clueless about how much H<sub>2</sub>O they flush down the toilet each day, the report found.

The report, published Monday, also found that Americans were only slightly aware of how much water goes into growing the food they eat.

“In general, people tend to underestimate water,” said study author Shahzeen Attari. She is a professor at Indiana University. She added that they don't just guess the amount wrong, but they get it wrong by a lot.

The study's findings were based on an Internet survey of 1,020 people. The results come just as the country is in the middle of a national drought. An area from the Pacific Coast to portions of the Mississippi Valley faces a lack of water. California is struggling with the most severe conditions.

## Flushing Away Water

"Most Americans assume that water supply is both reliable and plentiful," Attari wrote. She says that climate change will make water less constant. Many scientists blame the burning of oil, gas and coal for rising global temperatures. [Climate change \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global warming\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=global+warming) is also blamed for an increase in salt in ground water and increasingly unpredictable rainfall. These problems may lead to less water for crops or drinking.

More than a quarter of water used by the average household is from flushing toilets. The Environmental Protection Agency is the government agency in charge of protecting our water supply and nature. It says that installing low-flow toilets will save the most household water. Yet fewer than 2 percent of the surveyed adults realized this, the study found.

"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."

A standard toilet uses about 3.5 gallons of water per flush. A low-flow toilet uses just 1.6 gallons or less, Attari noted.

Reducing the number of times people flush would also decrease the amount of water used in the home, she said. "If it's yellow, let it mellow," she recommends.

## Need 13 But Use 98 Gallons

Experts say the next greatest water saver is a high-efficiency clothes washer. A standard top-loading washer will use about 34 gallons per load. But, a high-efficiency front-loading clothes washer will use less than 15 gallons.

The survey asked respondents to name the single best thing Americans could do to conserve water. Almost half of survey participants got it wrong. Roughly 43 percent of those surveyed said that taking fewer, or shorter, showers would save the most water.

The next most popular response was turning off the water while doing other activities, including brushing their teeth.

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

The average length of a shower is about 8 minutes, Attari said. "So if you were to decrease the length of the shower from 8 minutes to 5 minutes, that would save roughly 8 percent of your total water use in the home."

Peter Gleick is a water expert with the Pacific Institute. He has estimated that humans need 13 gallons of clean water each day for basic needs. Yet in 2005, the average American was estimated to use about 98 gallons per day.

## **No Idea About Crops**

However, it wasn't only personal use of water that people were fuzzy on in the survey. They also tended to underestimate how much water was used to grow different foods.

The survey asked respondents to estimate how much water was used to produce a pound each of sugar, rice, cheese and coffee. Most people said they were all about the same.

In fact, each require vastly different amounts of water: 157 gallons were required to make a pound of sugar; 299 gallons for a pound of rice; 606 gallons for a pound of cheese and a whopping 2,264 gallons for a pound of coffee.

People have no idea how much water it takes to make the different foods that we eat, Attari said.

The author said that Americans had a somewhat better sense of how much water they use than they did about the amount of power they use. She said this was understandable. Energy changes into many different things — light, heat, motion, sound, etc. Water is much more familiar, although rarely thought about.

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

## Quiz

- 1 Select the sentence from the paragraph below that shows how a small number of people understand water usage.
- 2 Which of the following details from the article BEST supports why Americans need to be better informed about how much water they use?
  - (A) A whopping 2,264 gallons of water are needed for a pound of coffee.
  - (B) The study's findings were based on an Internet survey of 1,020 people.
  - (C) She added that they don't just guess the amount wrong, but they get it wrong by a lot.
  - (D) The next most popular response was turning off the water while doing other activities, including brushing their teeth.
- 3 Which of the following is the MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
  - (A) The survey asked respondents to estimate how much water was used to produce a pound each of sugar, rice, cheese and coffee. Most people said they were all about the same.
  - (B) "In general, people tend to underestimate water," said study author Shahzeen Attari. She is a professor at Indiana University. She added that they don't just guess the amount wrong, but they get it wrong by a lot.
  - (C) Experts say the next greatest water saver is a high-efficiency clothes washer. A standard top-loading washer will use about 34 gallons per load. But, a high-efficiency front-loading clothes washer will use less than 15 gallons.
  - (D) More than a quarter of water used by the average household is from flushing toilets. The Environmental Protection Agency is the government agency in charge of protecting our water supply and nature. It says that installing low-flow toilets will save the most household water. Yet fewer than 2 percent of the surveyed adults realized this, the study found.

Which of the following details from the article BEST explains why many Americans are clueless about their water usage?

- (A) Attari said that taking shorter showers would help to save water. However, the savings are less than many people realize.
- (B) Reducing the number of times people flush would also decrease the amount of water used in the home, she said. "If it's yellow, let it mellow," she recommends.
- (C) Peter Gleick is a water expert with the Pacific Institute. He has estimated that humans need 13 gallons of clean water each day for basic needs. Yet in 2005, the average American was estimated to use about 98 gallons per day.
- (D) The author said that Americans had a somewhat better sense of how much water they use than they did about the amount of power they use. She said this was understandable. Energy changes into many different things — light, heat, motion, sound, etc. Water is much more familiar, although rarely thought about.

## Answer Key

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4

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