

World Water Monitoring Day 2007
Media release by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry
15 October 2007

To filter or not to filter

In the spirit of World Water Monitoring Day (18 October) the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry would like to stress that South Africa's tap water is safe for drinking, particularly in cities and towns where the it constantly complies with national standards.

It is thus the department's aim to keep water users informed about effectiveness of some of the home filter systems which are touted by salespersons as machines that purify tap water.

What is the status of our drinking water quality at present? But if we are to believe all that we are told, we may be excused for thinking that it is not acceptable. At many tradeshows or exhibitions salespeople of some home-purifications systems (water-filters) promise to transform what they call "your highly contaminated" tap water into pure and healthy drinking water. This is extremely misleading most of the time.

A common demonstration involves placing two electrodes into the water and applying a current across them. This you are told will cause the "contaminants" in the water to drop out of solution. Within a few minutes a brownish sediment appears in the water, the effect of which is both impressive and somewhat alarming. The test is then repeated, this time using "pure water" (filtered water) and in this case no sediment is formed. This is often enough to convince one to purchase the filter to ensure that these "harmful" contaminants are removed from the water.

However the answer is in fact quite simple. Good quality drinking water contains minerals such as calcium and magnesium, which are most certainly not harmful; in fact they are essential to good health. These minerals make the tap water or mineral water a good conductor of electricity, so the current flows through the water and the iron electrode actually starts to dissolve in the water, causing a brownish sediment to appear. The "pure water" is in fact demineralised or distilled water and therefore is a very poor conductor of electricity. When the current is applied, nothing happens, since no current can flow through the demineralised water. This test therefore demonstrates the presence of minerals in the water and not harmful contaminants at all.

Concerning the overall tap water quality. Much is being done to ensure that South Africa maintains its status as one of the countries where one can safely consume tap water. This is the case for the majority of reticulated water in this country especially in the cities and bigger towns where the tap water constantly complies with our national standards. While some of the rural areas are still a concern, huge improvements are evident especially with Government's commitment to supply all South Africans with treated tap water.

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