

Water and Sanitation in the News

FACT CHECK: Is drinking tap water in Africa 'risky business'?

Africa Check tackles the claim that all tap water in Africa is 'unsafe for human consumption'. Is drinking tap water in Africa "risky business"?

An [infographic published on the UK's Mail Online](#) claimed this, saying that tap water in every African country is "unsafe for human consumption".



Africans were quick to jump to the continent's defence, including the Africa Check team based in South Africa. Many branded the claim a generalisation and said that they drank African tap water daily without any ill effects. "I drink 'African tap water' every day and I'm healthy as a horse," tweeted a user called Sandrine. Is the claim true? And how was this conclusion reached? We looked into it.

Infographic not based on water quality tests

The infographic, originally published by budget airline website Just the Flight, used "information taken from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)". The CDC's media relations representative, Christine Pearson, told Africa Check that the infographic was likely based on a cellphone app they had produced called "Can I eat this?" The app, Pearson said, "gives recommendations on food and water safety while traveling globally".

Pearson said that the CDC does not test tap water globally. "The water part of the app was based on the [United Nations Human] Development Index data," she said. This UN index is a measure of human development on a scale of 0 to 1. The closer the score gets to 1, the higher the level of human development. The CDC used 0.85 as a cut-off point, meaning that only 31 out of 187 countries were considered to have safe tap water. Pearson did not respond to questions regarding why that cut-off point was chosen as an indicator of water quality. In contrast, the United States of America's department of state advises American tourists that "food and water are generally safe" in South Africa, for instance.

'Very crude' way to measure tap water safety

Experts told Africa Check the index was not suitable to determine the quality of tap water. Director of the Stockholm International Water Institute's Africa regional centre, Anton Earle, told Africa Check the cut-off point appeared arbitrary. Water resource management scientist Anthony Turton said the use of the index as an indicator of water safety was "very crude". He added: "If it were true then there would be millions of people sick, which is not the case."

Senior advisor for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene at Unicef, Andrew Trevett, told Africa Check that if the cut-off point were accurate then "countries such as Portugal, Poland and Hungary, all of which are in the European Union with stringent water safety regulations, would be categorised as not having safe drinking water"... The quality and safety of tap water within countries can also vary greatly. Earle told Africa Check that "there are usually big differences between various parts of countries – strong rural-urban divides exist". "To lump together an entire country as equal risk seems extreme," said Bartram. He explained that there are "huge sub-national differences" in the quality of tap water within countries...

Conclusion: Not all tap water in Africa is 'unsafe for human consumption'

The UK Mail Online's claim that all tap water in Africa is "unsafe for human consumption" is false. ...However, Bartram notes that "as advice to a traveller, and especially a risk averse traveller, it may nevertheless be appropriate".

Source: [Eye Witness News, 06 October 2015](#)

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CONTACT US: Tel: +27 (0)21 887 7161

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