

Like nutritious meals, water should be seen as an essential nutrient for learners

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Clean water is essential for healthy growth and development in children. It aids in maintaining a healthy weight, reduces the risk of developing certain chronic diseases, and can help prevent dental cavities when fluoridated.



Water, according to the US-based [National Institute of Health](#), itself is considered an essential nutrient because the body requires more water than it can produce. All biochemical reactions take place in water, which fills the spaces in and between cells and assists in forming structures of large molecules such as proteins and glycogen.

Unfortunately, South Africa is a water-scarce country and is rated the 30th driest country in the world, while also having a rapidly growing population. This is based on its average annual rainfall of 500mm compared to the world average of 860mm.

In addition to the country's unpredictable rainfall and common periods of drought that limit its water resources, South Africa also faces tremendous challenges with ageing and inadequate water infrastructure, leaving some communities with little or no access to potable water.

This is according to Tiger Brands Foundation (TBF) operations manager Karl Muller, who notes that a child's health and development depend on adequate hydration, which regulates body temperature, transports nutrients and oxygen to cells, eliminates waste products and supports vital organs.

He says that it is essential to use clean and safe water for cooking and food preparation, as using unclean and unsafe water can cause many deadly diseases. To ensure food safety, it is therefore paramount to take necessary measures to prevent various harmful diseases that can occur in contaminated water.

TBF's long-running in-school breakfast programme currently provides nutritious breakfasts to 74,080 learners every day, at

98 schools around the country in all nine provinces. Since it was established, the TBF has served 132 472 145 meals as of March 2023.

“Without an adequate supply of clean water, we cannot prepare our in-school breakfasts. This programme is a vital social safety net that provides many children from vulnerable communities with their sole nutritious meal of the day,” says Muller.

It is also a critical intervention that aims to improve the ability of children to learn by combating malnutrition, reducing hunger and improving school attendance.”

He points out that while efforts are being made to bring widespread education to many poor communities in South Africa, a lack of proper water and sanitation facilities in these areas remains prevalent. In water-scarce and underprivileged areas, a lack of water and toilets in schools often prevents students from completing their education.

“Just as a balanced and nutritious meal is one of the most effective tools to deal with the issue of learner dropout, we must start seeing access to clean water in the same way. The unavailability of clean water has grave implications for the academic performance and attendance of students,” says Muller.

“This is because, without access to clean drinking water, students are at risk of falling sick due to water-borne diseases, struggle to concentrate for long periods due to dehydration and are often unable to maintain proper hygiene standards due to the lack of clean water.”

Additionally, he points out that schools are unable to offer programmes if they are unable to supply water to students, staff and their families. This also has an impact on the education system, limiting opportunities for growth and development.

“Aside from education, a dependable water source is crucial for cultivating crops to feed households, ensure stable livelihoods, and generate income for other nutritional necessities. However, due to the acceleration of climate change, access to water has become more unpredictable, resulting in more frequent and severe droughts and floods,” says Muller.

“Mismanagement of water resources can lead to water shortages and pollution, which can harm a child's ability to grow and develop. Therefore, it is important to recognise the role that water plays in early child nutrition and to seek guidance on how to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits of water investments for nutrition.”

When the quantity or quality of water is inadequate, health problems arise, most notably dehydration and diarrhoea, along with related infections. Contaminated water can act as a carrier for waterborne diseases like cholera and typhoid, leading to their transmission from an infected person to others. A recent cholera outbreak in Tshwane was linked to the poor state of water services and sanitation services in the Hammanskraal area.

“Improving access to water and sanitation facilities at schools can prevent diseases from contaminated water and promote education. Access to proper bathrooms and clean drinking water can have a positive impact on school enrolment and dropout rates. This, in turn, helps to improve the economy by creating a more educated population, leading to better economic development in the future,” Muller concludes.

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