

Quarantine raising your utility bills? How to save water while washing dishes

If your dishes are piling up at a rapid pace, your water bill could be creeping up, too. Here are a few ways to keep consumption at a minimum.

We're in the thick of staying at home during the coronavirus pandemic, and in our house it feels like the dirty dishes regenerate every time I clear out the sink. Turn around to put away the cereal and -- POW! -- more dishes. Where do they come from? I didn't even know we still had those bowls.



I tend to hand wash pots and pans and put plates, cups and utensils in the dishwasher. All that water use starts to add up when it comes time to pay the water bill. However, there are ways you can keep an eye on your water consumption and still eat off clean plates at every meal.



Use a dishwasher as often as you can

If you're running the dishwasher more often during quarantine, don't fret it. It may be tempting to think that handwashing dishes after meals and snacks is the easier, faster and more conserving way to go, but you might be surprised.

According to the EPA and a 2016 study by the Water Research Foundation, the average dishwasher uses about 6 gallons per load, while older models can use up to 10 gallons. An Energy Star-certified dishwasher can use as few as 3 gallons per load, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Pair that with the fact that your kitchen faucet probably uses around two gallons per minute, and unless you can get your dishes washed in five minutes or less, a dishwasher just makes sense as the most efficient way to clean dishes. Of course, not every home has a dishwasher. If you're washing dishes by hand, keep reading. There are other ways you can consume less water.



Let dirty dishes soak

Gross, but effective. You can let your dishes soak rather than spend minutes (and gallons of water) washing them over and over under the running faucet. You also don't need a full sink to soak dishes effectively.

The best way to do this is to lather all your dishes at once. Then, plug the sink and run some water over all of them. Turn the faucet back on only when you're ready to rinse everything. Your dishes do need clean water to be sanitary, but soaking them all together in a few centimeters of dishwater isn't a health risk as long as you soap and rinse well at the end.

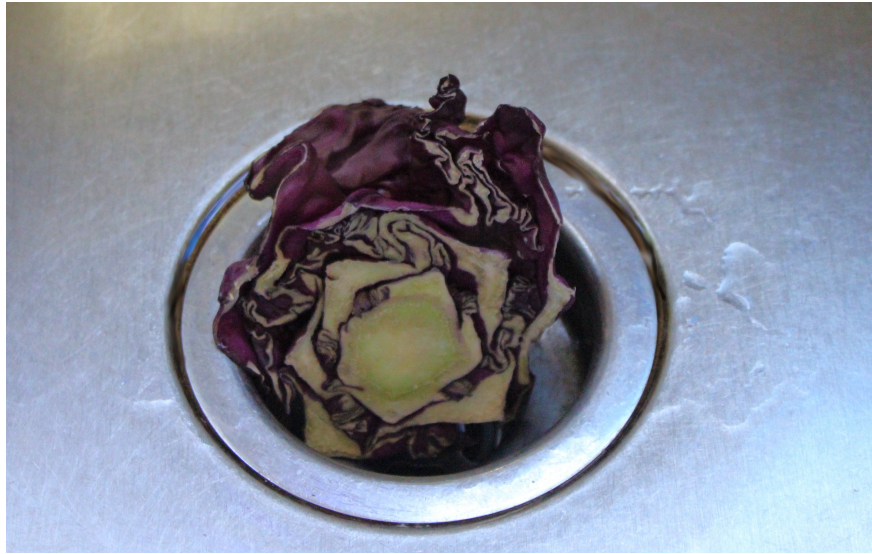


Organize your sink

If you are going to soak dishes, there should be a method to your madness. Yes, even dishwashing can benefit from some planning and strategy. It might sound odd, but stacking and nesting dishes inside one another is one way to save water.

You'll soak everything without filling each bowl up with its own water. While you won't want a stack of dishes to sit in your sink for days on end, nesting them is a good way to make the most use of the least water.

For example, the hot soap and water surrounding the forks and small dishes sitting inside a larger bowl will begin dissolving bits of stuck-on food, which will make it that much easier to clean.



Ditch the disposal

In-sink garbage disposals are an easy way to get rid of gunk, but they also require running water to safely operate. If you want to cut down on water use, scrape your food into the trash or a compost receptacle rather than the garbage disposal.

Plus, there are plenty of food items that should never be put down a disposal like bones and fruit pits. Scraping food into the trash will keep you from unintentionally harming your sink's disposal system or clogging your drain.



Swap your sponge for a pot scraper

If you hate soaking and scrubbing dishes, you're not alone. CNET Executive Editor Rich Brown recently sang the praises of one tiny kitchen tool, a \$5 pot scraper that does the heavy lifting. It's a cheap, handy piece of plastic that can tackle stuck-on food and keep you from needing to fill your sink with dirty, burnt lasagna water for hours on end.

The pot scraper's hard (often silicone) edge and angled surfaces give you more leverage when it comes to taking crud off those pans. You can also use it as a generalized scraper after meals.

To conserve the most water possible, scrape food off each plate before you put it under the faucet. Do this before the food has a chance to dry onto the plate. The more work you get done before you need to lather and rinse, the better.

Soap and shake

It's not the latest Tiktok craze, it's a method of washing your dishes that could save some water. Simply add soap and hot water to any containers you're washing, snap on the lids and shake them periodically. Think of it like a manual dishwasher for your mason jars.

You'll only put water in the containers once, and agitating the soap every so often will get every inch clean -- or at least cleaner than you otherwise would. This really only works with items that have a lid, so don't go spinning suds around your kitchen from an empty bowl.

No matter how you choose to conserve water, with a big of diligence, you'll see a decrease in those bills. If you're interested in more home water hacks, you can find tips online for everything from how to make your own distilled water to how to make a simple sprinkler system and ways to get started with composting.

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