THE WATER CYCLE · PART 2 OF 8 · AGES 11–16

Earth's Water by the Numbers

Where all of Earth's water is stored, and how long a single drop stays in each place before it moves on.

2.5%

of all the water on Earth is fresh water

The other 97.5% is salty: in the oceans, in salt lakes and deep underground.

96.5%

of Earth's water is in the oceans, seas and bays

About 1,338 million km³ of salty water, by far the biggest store in the water cycle.

68.7%

of Earth's fresh water is frozen in ice caps, glaciers and permanent snow

About 24 million km³ of ice, mostly in Antarctica and Greenland.

30.1%

of Earth's fresh water is groundwater, hidden underground

It fills cracks and spaces in soil and rock. Wells and springs draw on this store.

0.007%

of Earth's water is in freshwater lakes and rivers

About 1/150 of 1%, yet rivers and lakes supply most of the water people use every day.

~9 days

is how long a water molecule stays in the air, on average

Then it falls back as rain or snow. The range is about 5 to 15 days.

3,000+ years

is how long water typically stays in the oceans

The average residence time in oceans and inland seas is 3,000 to 3,500 years.

200,000 years

is how long water can stay locked in an ice cap

Ice caps hold water for 10,000 to 200,000 years. Deep groundwater can stay put for 3,000 to 10,000 years.

Small store, fast flow

The air holds only about 0.001% of Earth's water, yet it is the cycle's busiest route. Each molecule stays about nine days, so the air is emptied and refilled again and again, while ocean water can wait thousands of years.

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