

HOMES & CONSTRUCTION

DIRTY TANKS, DEADLY WATER: WHY CLEANING MATTERS

A shocking video of a water tank coated with thick layers of filth recently sent social media into uproar, leaving viewers horrified at what many families could unknowingly be drinking and using to cook every day. What appeared to be a tank full of creamy local brew was, in fact, contaminated water covered in dirt and bacteria after months of neglect. The disturbing images have reignited urgent concerns over poor water tank maintenance in Ugandan homes, with health experts warning that unclean tanks could be silently exposing thousands to deadly diseases such as cholera, typhoid and dysentery, writes **UMAR NSUBUGA**

In many Ugandan homes, water tanks have become more than simple storage facilities; they are essential for survival amid unreliable water supply and rising utility costs. From urban rentals to rural farms, they provide a dependable reserve when taps run dry.

For Joyce Nalweyiso, a poultry farmer, installing a water tank eased the burden of buying water daily. But she soon realised another challenge: ensuring the stored water remained safe.

David Musisi, a landlord in Matugga, Wakiso district, faces the same concern. After constructing rental units, he installed tanks to guarantee water supply for tenants, but admits he is unsure when the tanks should be cleaned.

Such experiences are increasingly common across Uganda, highlighting an important reality: a water tank is only useful when it is properly maintained.

CLEANING TANKS MATTERS
Dr Hassan Mayanja says unclean water tanks pose a serious health risk. Tanks left unattended for long periods accumulate sediments, algae and dangerous bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella*.

"These micro-organisms contaminate drinking water and expose families to illnesses such as typhoid, cholera, diarrhoea and dysentery," he explains.

Dr Mayanja says stagnant water creates ideal conditions for bacteria to multiply. Over time, the water develops a foul smell and unpleasant taste, clear signs



The cleaning schedule depends on the type of tank

UNDERGROUND TANKS NEED PROFESSIONAL CARE

Underground tanks are common in larger homes, schools and farms, but require specialised handling. Mukasa explains that such tanks should be built using waterproof cement and special bricks to prevent seepage and contamination. Cleaning is more complicated and often requires a professional plumber. During the dry season, the tank is opened and inspected for dirt buildup, especially around the pump. The process involves scrubbing the interior with suitable cleaning agents and removing wastewater before chlorination is carried out to disinfect the tank. Because of the technical risks involved, Mukasa discourages homeowners from attempting to clean underground tanks on their own.

of contamination. Even bathing with dirty water can cause skin infections, while children and the elderly are at greater risk because of weaker immunity.

He stresses that regular cleaning, ideally every three to six months, can significantly reduce disease outbreaks and save families from costly medical bills.

CLEANING SCHEDULE

The cleaning schedule depends on the type of tank and the environment around it. However, experts warn that no tank should remain unchecked for long periods.

Wilberforce Mukasa, the president of the Uganda National

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Plumbers Association, advises that plastic tanks should be cleaned at least twice a year. Metallic ones require cleaning every four months because they are more prone to



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rust and chemical reactions.

"Do not wait until the water changes colour or develops a smell. By then, contamination has already occurred," he warns.

CLEANING PLASTIC TANKS

Mukasa explains that a well-installed plastic tank should have a bottom valve to ease cleaning. The process begins by draining the remaining water.

The inside of the tank is then scrubbed using clean water and detergent before the dirty water is flushed out through the valve. Thorough rinsing is important to remove detergent residue before refilling the tank.

He also advises homeowners to keep overflow outlets covered. Open outlets allow mosquitoes to enter and lay eggs, leading to larvae in stored water, a dangerous sign of neglect.

METALLIC TANKS

Plumber Paul Bogere says many metallic tanks on the market are made from low-quality materials, making them highly vulnerable to rust. He explains that chemicals used to treat water supplied by the National Water and Sewerage Corporation can react with the metal, especially when tanks remain sealed for long periods.

"This reaction accelerates rusting, which damages the tank and contaminates the water," he says. To minimise the risk, metallic tanks should be cleaned every four months.

THE RIGHT TANK

A good tank should be durable, easy to clean and fitted with essential features such as valves and secure covers. Investing in

quality reduces maintenance costs and ensures safer water storage.

For people like Nalweyiso and Musisi, buying a tank is only the beginning. Its true value lies in proper maintenance.

THE COST OF NEGLECT

Ignoring water tank cleaning may appear cheaper in the short term, but experts warn that the long-term consequences are far more costly. Contaminated water leads to illness, hospital bills and lost productivity.

Mayanja notes that dirty water gradually weakens the body, making people more vulnerable to infections. In severe cases, diseases such as cholera can spread rapidly through households and communities, creating public health emergencies. Routine cleaning, however, is affordable and manageable.

Mukasa estimates that homeowners can save between sh30,000 and sh50,000 by learning basic cleaning skills instead of always hiring plumbers.

LASTING BENEFITS

Keeping a water tank clean is not difficult, but it requires consistency. Covering openings, inspecting tanks regularly and following recommended cleaning schedules can make a significant difference.

For many Ugandans, water tanks represent security in uncertain times. Yet that security depends entirely on the quality of the water stored inside.

As more households invest in water storage, attention must shift from simply accessing water to ensuring it is safe for use.