

What is groundwater? When rain falls to the ground, the water does not stop moving. Some of it flows along the surface to streams or lakes, some of it is used by plants, some evaporates and returns to the atmosphere, and some sinks into the ground. Imagine pouring a glass of water onto a pile of sand. Where does the water go? The water moves into the spaces between the particles of sand.

Groundwater is water that is found underground in the cracks and spaces in soil, sand and rock. Groundwater is stored in--and moves slowly through--layers of soil, sand and rocks called **aquifers**. Aquifers typically consist of gravel, sand, sandstone, or fractured rock, like limestone. These materials are **permeable** because they have large connected spaces that allow water to flow through. The speed at which groundwater flows depends on the size of the spaces in the soil or rock and how well the spaces are connected.

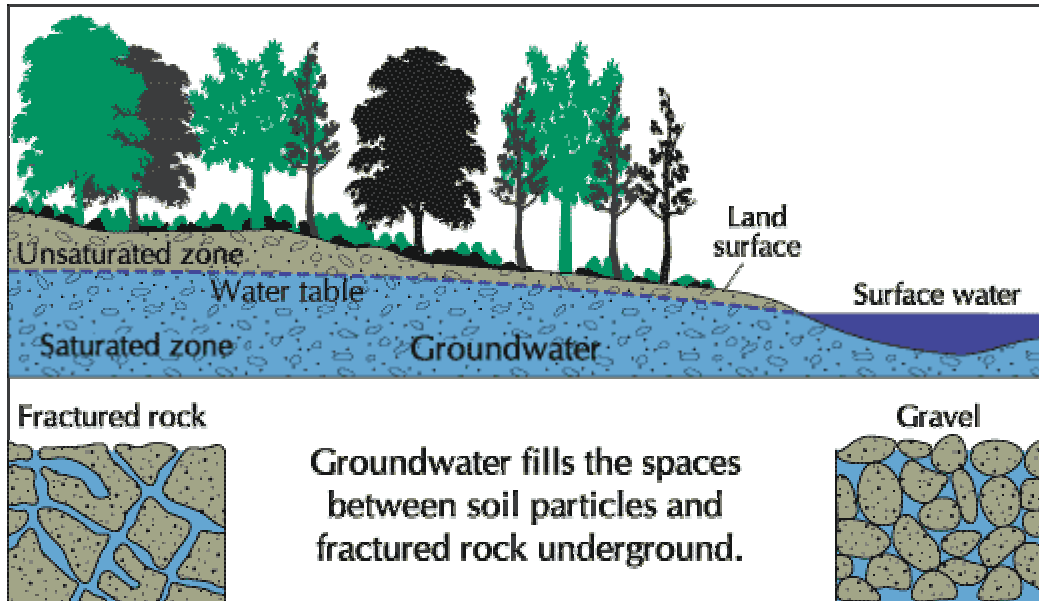


Image compliments of US Geological Survey, adapted by The Groundwater Foundation.

The area where water fills the aquifer is called the **saturated zone** (or saturation zone). The top of this zone is called the **water table**. The water table may be located only a foot below the ground's surface or it can sit hundreds of feet down.

Groundwater can be found almost everywhere. The water table may be deep or shallow; and may rise or fall depending on many factors. Heavy rains or melting snow may cause the water table to rise, or heavy pumping of groundwater supplies may cause the water table to fall.

Water in aquifers is brought to the surface naturally through a **spring** or can be **discharged** into lakes and streams. Groundwater can also be extracted through a **well** drilled into the aquifer. A well is a pipe in the ground that fills with groundwater. This water can be brought to the surface by a pump. Shallow wells may go dry if the water table falls below the bottom of the well. Some wells, called **artesian wells**, do not need a pump because of natural pressures that force the water up and out of the well.

Groundwater supplies are replenished, or **recharged**, by rain and snow melt. In some areas of the world, people face serious water shortages because groundwater is used faster than it is naturally replenished. In other areas groundwater is polluted by human activities.

In areas where material above the aquifer is permeable, pollutants can readily sink into groundwater supplies. Groundwater can be polluted by landfills, septic tanks, leaky underground gas tanks, and from overuse of fertilizers and pesticides. If groundwater becomes **polluted**, it will no longer be safe to drink.

Groundwater is used for drinking water by more than 50 percent of the people in the United States, including almost everyone who lives in rural areas. The largest use for groundwater is to irrigate crops.

It is important for all of us to learn to protect our groundwater because of its importance as a source of water for drinking and irrigation.