STM JOURNALS

Journal of
Water Pollution &
Purification Research

ISSN: 2394-7306
Volume 13, Issue 1, 2026
January–April
DOI (Journal): 10.37591/JoWPPR

https://journals.stmjournals.com/jowppr

Research JoWPPR

Advanced Water Purification Techniques for Sustainable Clean Water Management: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

The growing global demand for safe drinking water, coupled with increasing pollution from industrialization, urbanization, and agricultural activities, has intensified the need for efficient and sustainable water purification technologies. Conventional water treatment processes often fail to remove emerging contaminants such as pharmaceuticals, microplastics, endocrine-disrupting compounds, and heavy metals. Advanced water purification technologies—including membrane filtration, advanced oxidation processes (AOPs), nanotechnology-based adsorbents, photocatalysis, electrochemical treatment, and bio-inspired purification systems—have emerged as promising solutions for addressing complex water contamination challenges. This review critically examines the principles, efficiency, advantages, and limitations of modern water purification techniques. Comparative analysis of these technologies is provided in terms of removal efficiency, cost, scalability, and environmental sustainability. The review also highlights hybrid treatment approaches and the integration of artificial intelligence and smart monitoring systems for optimizing purification processes. Finally, future perspectives on sustainable water treatment technologies and research challenges are discussed to support global efforts toward safe and accessible clean water. In recent years, the development of multifunctional materials and innovative system designs has significantly enhanced the performance of water purification technologies. For instance, nanocomposite membranes and functionalized adsorbents have demonstrated superior selectivity and adsorption capacity for trace contaminants. Similarly, photocatalytic materials such as titanium dioxide and graphene-based composites have shown remarkable efficiency in degrading persistent organic pollutants under visible light irradiation. Electrochemical techniques, including capacitive deionization and electrocoagulation, offer energy-efficient alternatives for desalination and pollutant removal, particularly in resource-limited settings. Moreover, hybrid systems that combine multiple treatment methods—such as membrane filtration coupled with AOPs or biological treatment integrated with electrochemical processes—have proven effective in overcoming the limitations of individual techniques. The incorporation of real-time sensing technologies and machine learning algorithms further enhances process control, enabling predictive maintenance and optimization of treatment efficiency. Despite these advancements, challenges related to high operational costs, membrane fouling, energy consumption, and large-scale implementation persist. Addressing these issues requires interdisciplinary research, policy support, and the development of cost-effective and eco-friendly materials. Such efforts are essential to ensure the long-term sustainability and widespread adoption of advanced water purification technologies.

Keywords: Advanced oxidation processes, emerging contaminants, membrane filtration, nanotechnology, sustainable water treatment, water purification

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Received Date: March 09, 2026
Accepted Date: March 09, 2026
Published Date: March 09, 2026

Citation: Neeraj Virdi, Roberto Acevedo. Advanced Water Purification Techniques for Sustainable Clean Water Management: A Comprehensive Review. Journal of Water Pollution & Purification Research. 2026; 13(1): 47–52p.

INTRODUCTION

Freshwater scarcity is becoming a critical global issue due to population growth, climate change, and increasing contamination of natural water resources. According to the World Health Organization, nearly two billion people worldwide lack access to safely managed drinking water services. Traditional treatment methods such as coagulation, sedimentation, filtration, and chlorination are effective for removing suspended solids and pathogens but often fail to eliminate emerging contaminants including pharmaceutical residues, pesticides, microplastics, and heavy metals. Advanced water purification technologies have been developed to overcome these limitations. These technologies employ physical, chemical, and biological processes capable of degrading or removing complex pollutants at very low concentrations. Recent advancements in nanotechnology, membrane engineering, photocatalysis, and electrochemical systems have significantly improved water treatment efficiency while reducing environmental impact. This review provides a comprehensive evaluation of advanced purification technologies and their role in sustainable water management [1–5].

In particular, membrane-based technologies such as reverse osmosis, nanofiltration, and ultrafiltration have gained prominence due to their high selectivity and ability to remove dissolved contaminants at the molecular level. Similarly, advanced oxidation processes (AOPs), including photocatalysis and ozonation, generate highly reactive species such as hydroxyl radicals that effectively degrade persistent organic pollutants into less harmful compounds. Nanomaterials, including carbon nanotubes, graphene oxide, and metal–organic frameworks, have further enhanced adsorption capacity and catalytic efficiency, enabling the removal of trace-level contaminants with high precision [6, 7].

Electrochemical water treatment methods, such as electrocoagulation and electrooxidation, offer additional advantages including reduced chemical usage and operational flexibility. Biological approaches, including biofiltration and constructed wetlands, also contribute to sustainable treatment by utilizing natural processes for pollutant removal. Despite these advancements, challenges such as high operational costs, membrane fouling, energy consumption, and scalability remain significant barriers to widespread implementation. Therefore, ongoing research is focused on developing cost-effective, energy-efficient, and environmentally friendly systems. Integrating multiple treatment technologies into hybrid systems presents a promising strategy to achieve comprehensive water purification and ensure long-term water security [8–10].

MAJOR WATER CONTAMINANTS

Water contamination originates from both natural and anthropogenic sources. Major pollutants include (Table 1).

The complexity and diversity of these contaminants require advanced purification methods capable of selective removal and degradation.

MEMBRANE-BASED WATER PURIFICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Membrane filtration technologies have gained prominence due to their high separation efficiency and modular design. These systems operate based on selective permeability, enabling the effective removal of suspended solids, microorganisms, and dissolved contaminants from liquids [11–15]. Common membrane processes include microfiltration, ultrafiltration, nanofiltration, and reverse osmosis, each distinguished by pore size and separation capability.

Table 1. The distinguished by pore size and separation capability.

Contaminant Type	Sources	Environmental Impact
Heavy metals (Pb, Hg, Cd, As)	Mining, Industrial effluents	Toxicity and bioaccumulation
Organic pollutants	Pharmaceuticals, pesticides	Hormonal disruption
Microplastics	Plastic waste degradation	Ecosystem contamination
Pathogens	Sewage discharge	Waterborne diseases
Nutrients (N, P)	Fertilizers, agriculture	Eutrophication

Their adaptability allows integration into various industrial sectors, including water treatment, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and chemical manufacturing. Additionally, membrane systems are energy-efficient and require relatively lower chemical inputs compared to conventional separation methods. Advances in material science have further enhanced membrane performance, improving fouling resistance, permeability, and durability. Innovations such as nanocomposite membranes and surface modification techniques have contributed to extended operational life and reduced maintenance costs. Despite challenges like membrane fouling and initial investment costs, ongoing research continues to address these limitations, making membrane filtration a sustainable and reliable solution for modern separation and purification needs [16].

Types of Membrane Filtration

Reverse osmosis is widely used in desalination and drinking water purification due to its ability to remove up to 99% of dissolved salts and contaminants (Table 2).

Advantages

- High removal efficiency
- Chemical-free separation
- Compact system design

Limitations

- Membrane fouling
- High energy consumption
- Concentrate disposal challenges

ADVANCED OXIDATION PROCESSES (AOPS)

Advanced oxidation processes involve the generation of highly reactive hydroxyl radicals capable of oxidizing persistent organic pollutants [17].

Common AOP Techniques

Hydroxyl radicals produced during AOPs can mineralize organic contaminants into carbon dioxide and water (Table 3).

NANOTECHNOLOGY IN WATER PURIFICATION

Nanotechnology has revolutionized water treatment by introducing highly efficient nanomaterials capable of selective adsorption and catalytic degradation. These advanced materials, including nanoparticles, nanofibers, carbon nanotubes, and graphene-based composites, offer exceptional surface area-to-volume ratios, enabling enhanced interaction with contaminants.

Table 2. Classification of membrane filtration technologies based on pore size and target contaminants.

Technology	Pore Size	Target Contaminants
Microfiltration (MF)	0.1–10 µm	Suspended solids
Ultrafiltration (UF)	0.01–0.1 µm	Bacteria, viruses
Nanofiltration (NF)	1–10 nm	Organic molecules
Reverse Osmosis (RO)	<1 nm	Salts, heavy metals

Table 3. Overview of advanced oxidation processes (AOPs), their mechanisms, and typical applications in water treatment.

Process	Mechanism	Applications
Ozone (O_3)	Direct oxidation	Wastewater treatment
UV/H_2O_2	Radical formation	Pharmaceutical removal
Fenton reaction	Fe^{2+} catalysis	Dye degradation
Photocatalysis	Light-induced oxidation	Organic pollutant degradation

As a result, they exhibit superior performance in removing heavy metals, organic pollutants, pathogens, and emerging contaminants such as pharmaceuticals and personal care products [18].

One of the key advantages of nanotechnology in water treatment lies in its ability to enable targeted removal processes. Functionalized nanomaterials can be engineered with specific surface chemistries that selectively bind to particular contaminants, improving efficiency while reducing energy consumption and operational costs. Additionally, nanocatalysts facilitate advanced oxidation processes, leading to the breakdown of complex organic molecules into less harmful byproducts [19].

Nanotechnology also supports the development of innovative filtration systems, such as nanomembranes, which provide high permeability, fouling resistance, and improved durability compared to conventional membranes. Furthermore, magnetic nanoparticles allow for easy separation and recovery after treatment, enhancing reusability and sustainability.

Despite these promising benefits, challenges related to potential toxicity, environmental impact, and large-scale implementation remain. Therefore, ongoing research focuses on ensuring the safe, cost-effective, and environmentally friendly application of nanotechnology in water purification systems [20].

Types of Nanomaterials

Nanomaterials offer large surface area, enhanced reactivity, and improved contaminant removal efficiency (Table 4).

PHOTOCATALYTIC WATER PURIFICATION

Photocatalysis uses semiconductor materials such as TiO_2 to generate reactive radicals under light irradiation.

Mechanism

- Light excites semiconductor electrons
- Electron–hole pairs are generated
- Reactive radicals degrade pollutants

Photocatalytic systems are particularly promising for solar-driven water purification systems.

ELECTROCHEMICAL WATER TREATMENT

Electrochemical methods utilize electrical current to remove contaminants through oxidation, reduction, and coagulation processes.

- Electrochemical Techniques
- Electrocoagulation
- Electrooxidation
- Electrodialysis

These methods are effective for removing heavy metals, dyes, and organic pollutants.

Table 4. Common nanomaterials used in water purification and their functional roles in contaminant removal.

Nanomaterial	Function
Carbon nanotubes	Adsorption of organic pollutants
Graphene oxide	Heavy metal removal
Silver nanoparticles	Antimicrobial activity

Metal oxide nanoparticles (TiO_2, ZnO)	Photocatalysis

Table 5. Hybrid water purification systems and their benefits in enhancing treatment efficiency and sustainability.

Hybrid System	**Benefit**
Membrane + AOP	Improved contaminant degradation
Nanomaterials + adsorption	Higher removal capacity
Biological + membrane systems	Sustainable wastewater treatment

HYBRID AND INTEGRATED WATER PURIFICATION SYSTEMS

Combining multiple purification techniques enhances treatment efficiency (Table 5). Examples include:

Hybrid technologies reduce energy consumption and improve pollutant removal efficiency.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

For water purification technologies to be sustainable, they must address:

- Energy efficiency
- Waste generation
- Cost effectiveness
- Environmental footprint

Green materials, renewable energy integration, and circular water reuse strategies are becoming increasingly important.

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Future research in water purification should focus on:

- AI-driven smart water treatment systems
- Low-energy desalination technologies
- Green nanomaterials
- Solar-powered purification systems
- Real-time water quality monitoring
- Integration of digital technologies and advanced materials will significantly enhance the sustainability of water treatment infrastructure.

CONCLUSION

Advanced water purification technologies are essential for addressing global water scarcity and contamination challenges. Membrane filtration, advanced oxidation processes, nanotechnology, photocatalysis, and electrochemical treatments offer promising solutions for removing complex pollutants from water systems. However, challenges such as high operational costs, membrane fouling, and environmental impacts must be addressed to ensure large-scale implementation. Future research should focus on developing energy-efficient, cost-effective, and environmentally sustainable purification technologies. The integration of advanced materials, hybrid treatment systems, and intelligent monitoring platforms will play a crucial role in achieving sustainable clean water management worldwide.

In addition, the development of novel functional materials such as graphene-based membranes, metal–organic frameworks (MOFs), and bio-inspired adsorbents has significantly enhanced the efficiency and selectivity of contaminant removal. These materials exhibit superior surface properties, high adsorption capacities, and improved resistance to fouling, making them suitable for next-generation purification systems. Furthermore, the incorporation of renewable energy sources, such as solar-driven photocatalysis and electrochemical systems, can reduce energy consumption and operational costs. Real-time monitoring using sensors and data-driven approaches, including artificial intelligence and machine learning, can optimize treatment processes and ensure consistent water quality. Emphasis should also be placed on scalability, lifecycle assessment, and the safe disposal or regeneration of used materials to minimize secondary pollution. Collaborative efforts between researchers, industries, and policymakers will be essential to translate laboratory-scale innovations into practical, large-scale water treatment solutions.

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