

# The Importance of Hydration

Summer is here, which means hotter temperatures and — for many of us — vacations and increased time spent outside. It also means a greater potential for dehydration and its effects, which can include heat stroke or worse.

During the summer months (or any other time during the year!), it's essential not to overlook the importance of proper hydration.

## What's the Big Deal about Hydration?

To function properly, your body depends on water and other fluids. You may have learned in school that water makes up more than half a person's body weight. In fact, every cell, tissue, and organ relies on proper hydration. As people get older, getting enough water becomes even more important.

Water benefits your body in many ways:

- helps regulate temperature
- transports nutrients and oxygen
- aids in waste removal
- keeps heart rate and blood pressure at healthy levels
- protects organs and tissue — including eyes, ears, and heart
- helps lubricate joints
- creates saliva
- and more

Your body is constantly losing water: when you go the bathroom, sweat... even breathe! When you're sick, water is even more important, since high fevers, vomiting, and diarrhea often contribute to rapid fluid loss. This is why you might be told to "Replenish your fluids!" when you're sick.

## How Much Water Do I Need?

When a person is even slightly dehydrated, doctors say their cognitive ability drops more than 25 percent. That means when your body isn't getting the water and other liquids it needs, you won't be able to pay attention as well, and you might find it more difficult to have a conversation, drive a car, and do other activities.

Most health experts agree that people should drink at least half their body weight in water and other fluids each day. For most people, this equates to roughly six to eight glasses (eight ounces each) of fluids per day.

An effective gauge of water intake is urine color. Your urine should be colorless or very light yellow. A darker color following sleep is normal, however if you notice that your urine is consistently very dark in color or that you are not urinating at least twice a day, you may be at risk of dehydration.

## What About Other Fluids?

Water is typically the best and most accessible choice for healthy hydration. There are, however, other fluids that can help you meet your daily hydration goals, including:

- fruit and vegetable juices
- milk
- sports drinks
- coffee and tea
- soft drinks (soda)

Additionally, some foods contribute to healthy hydration:

- watermelon
- cucumbers
- carrots
- tomatoes
- lettuce
- low-sodium soup broth
- and more

One of the reasons why water is the ‘favorite’ method of maintaining hydration is because it is readily accessible in most areas, and does not contain any calories or additives.

Some fruit juices, sports drinks, and sodas contain significant amounts of sugar, which can contribute to weight gain. Diet sodas — as well as tea and coffee — are diuretics that encourage urination, which can cause you to become dehydrated.

## **Is There Such a Thing as Drinking Too Much Water?**

While health complications are possible from over-intake of water, these occurrences are rare, and are typically preventable.

One of the most obvious signs you are drinking more water than your body needs is frequent urination. This can also be a sign of other health complications, but if you are constantly drinking water and constantly having to use the restroom, you may wish to re-examine your water intake.

## **I Don’t Feel Thirsty. Why Should I Drink Water?**

When you feel parched and in need of a drink of water, your body is already dehydrated. That’s why it’s a good idea to ensure you are drinking enough water throughout the day. If you can’t remember the last time you had a drink of water, it’s a good idea to rehydrate at that time. You may also want to create a sort of schedule — if you find it difficult to remember to drink water throughout the day.

Another factor to consider is that the sensation for thirst is the same as hunger. Instead of drinking water or other fluids, some people may choose to eat more — thinking they are hungry — when their body is actually in need of hydration.

## **Signs of Dehydration**

It is possible to prevent hydration if you are aware of — and pay attention to — your body’s “warning signs,” which include:

- dry lips, mouth, and/or swollen tongue
- sudden fatigue
- sudden headache
- feeling dizzy or light-headed
- rapid heartbeat
- confusion and/or slurred speech
- irritability
- lack of urination, or urine that is very dark

## Effects of Dehydration

Dehydration can cause painful health complications, and in severe cases can even lead to death. As previously mentioned, your body's organs depend on proper and regular hydration. Two of these important organs are the kidneys.

Kidneys filter and purify blood, but also regulate blood pressure, filter out toxins, and balance your overall blood system. Proper hydration helps this system work, while inadequate hydration causes a stress on the process, which could ultimately lead to kidney failure and even death.

## Treating Dehydration

Severe cases of dehydration will require a doctor's intervention. For less extreme situations, there are methods by which to safely reverse its effects, including:

- drink small amounts of water at first, increasing your intake over the next several hours
- suck on ice chips or popsicles to encourage slow and safe re-hydration
- remove yourself from loud and chaotic situations, and take a rest (if possible)

## Hydration Tips

- 1) Carry a bottle of water (or metal canteen) and drink water throughout the day. Make sure you are refilling the bottle when it's empty.
- 2) Drink a glass of water when you wake up, and again before you go to bed.
- 3) Drink water before and after exercising.
- 4) Increase your water intake during hot weather.
- 5) Choose water over other drinks when eating out, spending time with friends and family, and at other times throughout the day.
- 6) Choose foods high in water content, such as lettuce, watermelon, vegetables (carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes), and yogurt.
- 7) Avoid foods that contribute to dehydration, such as high-sugar/caffeine drinks (sweet tea, soda, sports drinks, fruit juice, and coffee) and junk food (potato chips, fried food) that tend to have high sodium levels.
- 8) Add some non-calorie flavor to your water with a slice of lemon or lime.

## Parting Thoughts

Proper hydration can affect more than your health. It also impacts mood, social interactions, productivity, concentration, and other life factors. Your best defense against dehydration remains daily vigilance, to ensure you are consuming enough of the water and other fluids your body needs to survive. Pay attention to the signals your body is sending to your brain and take prompt and health-conscious action to prevent a potentially-uncomfortable situation. ■