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Water, water everywhere....are you getting enough to drink?

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Protein is good, carbohydrates are very important, but there is no nutrient as vital to our health as water. Our bodies are 65 - 75% water and it is up to us to retain our hydration level in order to optimize energy, health and sports performance. Our bodies use water for almost every function. Water is the major component of cellular reactions, it flushes the body of toxins, it transports nutrients, it takes part in digestive function, promotes fat breakdown and is the major temperature control device of the body.

We lose about two litres of water per day in normal function, not including that which is lost in exercising. An endurance athlete can easily lose 1.5 litres or more of fluid during each hour of exercise. A continuous replenishment is vital to prevent the premature onset of muscle fatigue and drowsiness. Water is best, but milk and juices and other beverages are about 90% water. Eating fruits and vegetables (think berries, oranges, celery, broccoli), which contain much of their weight in water, will contribute to your intake as well and have the added bonus of vitamins, antioxidants and fibre to help keep water in your intestines.

In terms of pure water, you should consume 8 - 10 glasses (approx. 2 litres) per day. Monitor your consumption by keeping a one litre bottle of water close by and use it as your guide. Another way to calculate your fluid needs is to divide your weight in pounds by half. This number in ounces is your recommended daily intake.

If you are a regular exerciser, you will want to try for three litres per day due to the extra water you use in exercise sessions. Dehydration will be the first thing to slow you down in a run or a fitness class. Drink two cups of water half an hour before you exercise and half a cup every 15 minutes during your workout. If you experience stomach cramps, reduce the amount until you find the right amount for your body. It is not uncommon to lose between one and two pounds of water during a hard workout. A further 16 ounces or 500 ml should be consumed after your workout for every pound of body weight lost during exercise.

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends drinking 2.5 - 5 cups of fluid per hour during exercise. Water being the beverage of choice if the exercise session lasts less than 60 minutes. If exercise is strenuous and goes beyond 60 minutes, a 4-8 percent carbohydrates solution (in the form of a sports drink) is suggested. Inclusion of sodium 0.5 - 0.7 grams per litre of fluid) is recommended to enhance palatability, promote fluid retention and possibly prevent hyponatremia (a serious condition caused by lack of sodium in the blood), which is being seen more and more often in marathon runners and tri-athletes. The bonus of sports drinks is that they taste more interesting than water (encouraging us to drink more), the electrolytes send "the message to our thirst receptors

that we need to drink," and the carbohydrates give us back a bit of energy we lost through exercise. The down side is that if you are trying to watch your weight, these drinks come with unwanted calories. A 591 ml bottle can have anywhere from 120 - 185 plus calories. Drink a few of these and you've cancelled out a lot of the calories you burned during that hour of exercise. Children may very well benefit from sports drinks.

Studies have shown they just won't drink water and that they don't have highly developed sweating mechanisms. Unless obesity is a real concern, there's no reason not to give active kids flavoured drinks, which they are much more likely to consume than plain old water. You can make your own sports drinks by mixing 1/4 cup of fruit juice with 1/4 teaspoon salt, 4 tablespoons sugar and 3 1/2 cups of water or buy fruit drink crystals and mix them with water to half the recommended strength and add 1/4 teaspoon salt per litre.

We have always been told to be aware of liquids which have a dehydrating effect. The two predominant ones being coffee and alcohol, which cause you to speed your water elimination through the kidneys. However, a recent study published in the Journal of the American College of Nutrition has shown that people who don't usually drink coffee gain two-thirds of a cup of water from a cup of java and those that are caffeine addicts will lose hardly any fluid, because their bodies have adjusted to it. On the other hand, alcohol does produce a net loss of fluid because the body uses up water to metabolize it. Consume in moderation.

According to the Mayo Clinic and other leading health care organizations, even mild dehydration can lead to health problems such as lethargy and constipation. By the time you feel thirsty you are already 1% dehydrated. At 3% dehydration you begin to feel fatigue. When we feel fatigue we don't often take the time to look after ourselves (i.e. stopping for fast food on the way home, skipping the exercise routine).

There is also some evidence that drinking adequate water may well prevent some diseases, such as kidney stones and may be associated with a lower incidence of colon cancer. They also suggest that you should drink more water if you have a cold or flu; even more if you have a fever. Some weight management experts believe that drinking a glass of water before meals can help reduce food intake and aid digestion.

With the hot summer weather upon us we need to stay hydrated by keeping our water intake up throughout the day, even if you are not thirsty. Before long you will wonder how you got by without that refreshing feeling of a cold glass of water!

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