



By Robin Weiss

Hydration: Benefits and Myths

The latest recommendations from the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Science, Dietary Reference Intake for Electrolytes and Water say:

"The fluids consumed do not have to be only water. Individuals can obtain their fluids from a variety of beverages and foods. Contrary to popular opinion, consumers do not need to consume '8 glasses of water a day' to meet their fluid needs."

The guideline to drink at least 8 glasses of water a day has been taught for a long time. But, it was never based on scientific evidence. In fact, most experts aren't even sure where the recommendation came from. One source of this "myth" may be a 1945 article from the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences which noted that a "suitable allowance" of water for adults is 2.5 liters a day, although much of that water already comes from the foods we eat.

An Institute of Medicine panel of the National Academy of Science has set new water intake recommendations for Americans. They say that fluid intake should be driven by thirst. However, as we get older we start to lose our sense of thirst. People over the age of 70 should make an effort to drink before feeling thirsty.

Plain water is not the only fluid that will hydrate us. All liquids, except those containing alcohol, can count towards our fluid intake because they all contain water. Additionally, about 40% of our water intake comes from solid foods.

The panel also refuted the idea that we need to drink an extra glass of water for every caffeinated beverage we consume to compensate for its diuretic effect. Again, contrary to what we've long heard, drinking caffeinated beverages will not significantly lower our total water level and can, in fact, contribute to our total water intake. If we drink them regularly, our bodies will adapt to our caffeine intake by holding on to more of the water in those beverages, thus regulating fluid levels accordingly.

Despite these new guidelines, drinking water should be emphasized for many reasons:

People today drink too many of their calories from soda, flavored coffees and teas, sports drinks, juice, and artificially-sweetened beverages that contain lots of calories, sugar, and other unwanted additives. Replacing high calorie, nutrient deficient beverages with 8 cups of plain water a day can help with weight management and offers other health benefits. Water helps promote regularity and is particularly helpful with digestion of the currently recommended high-fiber diet.

Water intake is beneficial for people trying to lose weight. In addition to being calorie-free and helping you feel fuller, it helps cleanse the body when weight loss and fat breakdown is occurring. It may also help to keep your hands and mouth busy, so you snack less. This is a form of behavior modification.

During one hour of vigorous exercise, the average person sweats out one quart of water. Without this water, muscles become dehydrated. Dehydrated muscles cannot work at their peak potential, so your workout will be less than productive. Drink water before and during your workout. Do what it takes to keep hydrated.

Strength training is recommended to build lean muscle. Muscle is made up of 70% water, so the more you train, the greater your body's water needs will be. Besides functioning at their best, hydrated muscles look more toned.

As a whole, we are made up of 70% water. Water regulates every function in our body. Water transports the nutrients our bodies need to look and feel good. Water flushes waste and toxins out of our bodies. Water flushes out impurities in our skin, and when skin cells are hydrated they plump up to give us a radiant complexion.

There are many aches and pains that people attribute to being old, sick, or tired, that could actually be dehydration. Considering that our brains are made up of 90% water, a lack of concentration and focus may be attributed to a lack of water. Nagging headaches can also be dehydration. What about painful joints? Water works as a lubricant that allows two opposing surfaces (e.g., the femur and the tibia at the knee) to glide freely and minimize friction damage, which can cause pain.

Some people worry that they could be drinking too much water. Water intoxication results when a dehydrated person drinks too much water without the accompanying electrolytes. You usually need to drink a large volume of water in a very short period of time to be in danger of this, which is why it's rare. Drink your water throughout the day and you should be fine.

How much fluid do you really need each day? It depends. Everyone's needs are different and dependent on factors such as your weight, how much you exercise, how many water-rich foods you eat, the amount of muscle mass you have, and the weather (i.e., heat and humidity). While 8 cups a day is a good goal for the average person, the best way to find out how much you need is to check the color of your urine. It should look like you squeezed a lemon in it. If it's much darker, try drinking a little more water.

References: KaiserPermanente.org 2007, Sparkpeople.com 2008, 2007