

Healthy Eating - Fluids

This dietary advice sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your diet. If you need more detailed advice, or if you are following a special diet that makes it difficult to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer you to a registered dietitian.

Why is fluid so important?

Fluid is essential for life. You can live without food for a few weeks but you cannot survive without fluid for more than a few days. This is because water is needed by your body to carry out many of the vital activities that maintain life such as:

- Regulating body temperature.
- Carrying out chemical reactions including those that aid the digestion of food.
- Assisting in normalising blood pressure.
- Removing waste products.

About 60% of your body is water. Each day your body loses some of this when you:

- Go to the toilet.
- Sweat.
- Breathe.

It is important to replace every drop of fluid your body loses each day or you will become dehydrated.

What happens if we become dehydrated?

- Being dehydrated can make you feel tired, irritable or constipated.
- Frequent headaches and urinary tract infections are also common.
- Even mild dehydration of 1-2% of body weight (that could be as little as 1-3 glasses of fluid) could reduce concentration and mental alertness as well as affect physical performance.
- Lots of people have become so used to being mildly dehydrated that they are not even aware they are not feeling their best.
- Chronic mild dehydration can also affect your long term health.

How much fluid is enough?

The amount of fluid you need depends on your age, activity, body size and the weather.

- As a rough guide, about 1.5 to 3 litres (about 6-12 glasses or mugs) of fluid a day is needed for a healthy adult on a mild day.
- More fluid will be required in warmer weather and during exercise.
- A good guide to whether you are drinking enough is by the colour of your urine. If there is lots of it and it is a pale straw-like colour you are probably drinking enough. If your urine becomes darker and there is little of it you may need to increase your fluid intake.

Can you have too much fluid?

It is possible to have too much fluid but it is extremely rare in healthy individuals. People taking part in extreme physical activity such as a marathon can become over hydrated if they take excess fluid without replacing the sodium that is lost as salt in sweat.

Is it only water that counts as fluid?

No. All your drinks and some foods count towards your fluid intake. Having a variety of drinks can help to make it easier and more enjoyable to keep hydrated.

In addition, some fluids, other than water, can help provide additional nutritional benefits. Specific information about some different types of fluids is provided overleaf.

Types of fluid

Plain and flavoured water

- Plain water, hot or cold, is a good choice for quenching thirst. It contains no calories and will not damage your teeth. It does not have to be bottled water because the tap water in this country is safe to drink. However, if you prefer bottled, filtered or sparkling water that is fine too.
- If you don't like the taste of plain water you could try adding a slice of lemon or lime. You could also try adding some squash or fruit juice or herbal tea bags for a bit more flavour.
- If you are underweight, choose a high calorie drink, not water.

Milk

Milk is a good source of calcium for bones and teeth. But flavoured milk drinks such as milkshakes and malt drinks often contain added sugar which can damage your teeth. Semi-skimmed or skimmed milk can be a healthy choice for many adults. Children should have whole milk until they are 2 years old when they can change to semi skimmed as long as they are eating well.

Fruit juices and smoothies

- Fruit juices and fruit smoothies are refreshing, tasty and contain lots of vitamins and minerals important for good health. A small glass (150ml) counts towards one of your five-a-day fruit and vegetable portions.
- However, these drinks are high in calories because of their high sugar content (squeezed from the fruit).
- The sugar and acid content of these drinks may damage teeth and so it is better to drink juices with a meal rather than on their own.
- Check the labels of the fruit juice you buy to make sure you are buying 100% fruit juice and not 'juice drinks' as these contain only a small amount of juice and often have a lot of added sugar.

Tea, coffee and other caffeinated drinks

Caffeine is a mild diuretic. This means that it may slightly increase the amount of urine produced by the body. Some people may be affected more than others but the effect is likely to be very small. So the fluid from tea, coffee, cola and other caffeinated drinks counts towards your fluid intake.

It is recommended to not have more than three caffeine-containing drinks a day. There is no limit on decaffeinated drinks.

Fizzy drinks, squashes and sports drinks

Fizzy drinks, squashes and sports drinks can contain a lot of sugar which can be harmful to your teeth and promote weight gain. If you are trying to lose weight keep full-sugar drinks to a minimum, choose Zero/Diet and low calorie versions instead.

Alcohol

Alcohol is a diuretic and drinking too much alcohol can cause dehydration. It is also high in calories so cutting down can help to control your weight. Women should drink no more than 2 units of alcohol per day and men no more than 3 units.

Special consideration for older adults

Dehydration is common in older adults because the sensation of thirst and kidney function may lessen with age. Reduced mobility and swallowing problems can also make drinking enough difficult. To help reduce the risk of dehydration it may help to:

- Drink smaller amounts more regularly.
- Try a variety of drinks.
- Organise drinks within easy reach.

Using "wet" food to increase fluid intake may also be beneficial for older adults. Foods such as fruit, vegetables, yogurts, jelly, custard, milk puddings, soups, stews and gravies can all help to increase fluid intake.