

Water: The Forgotten Nutrient

With all the talk about protein, carbohydrates, and fat, it's easy to forget about the most important nutrient - the one that makes up 55-75% of your body weight and plays a role in everything your body does every day. Water plays a starring role in every cell, organ, and system in your body. It makes up all body fluids, acts as a lubricant and protectant, aids in digestion and elimination of waste from the body, and regulates body temperature.

How much water should I drink?

In general, men need at least 12 cups of fluid daily, while women require at least nine cups.

Hydration is important for seniors since they are less active and might not feel thirsty; additionally, getting enough fluids, along with adequate fiber, helps prevent constipation.

Why so much?

Your body loses 8-12 cups of water every day and this needs to be replaced. Some factors which increase your fluid needs even more include: exercise, hot weather, low humidity, high altitude, a high fiber diet, and increased fluid losses (from caffeine and alcohol intake).

What should I drink?

While most of your fluid needs should be met by drinking water, it is available from other beverages, soups, and even foods. Skim milk, 100% fruit juice, and decaffeinated teas are mostly water, so go ahead and count them toward your daily goal. Fruits and vegetables also contain a fair amount of water. Since it's hard to track the amount of water you get from food, it's best to try for at least 8 cups of fluid daily.

The water in coffee and tea certainly does help keep people hydrated. Only a fool would believe that someone dying of dehydration and

thirst would be made worse by drinking coffee and tea. The only drink that might hasten death in a severely dehydrated person would be something very high in salt.

A recent study was the first to show people who drink more coffee are actually less likely to be hospitalized due to cardiac arrhythmia than those who drink no coffee. The main way drinking coffee could be bad for one's health is if it is not paper filtered (which raises bad cholesterol) and/or it is loaded with cream and sugar.



Bottled or Tap?

- For the most part, whether you drink bottled or tap water is a matter of taste. Drink what you like and you will tend to drink more. But keep these facts in mind:
- Fluoride: Most municipal tap water is fluoridated. If you rely solely on bottled water, check the label to see if it contains fluoride. If not, discuss fluoride supplementation with your dentist.
- Sodium: Municipal tap water is usually relatively low in sodium. Water treated with a home water softener can have higher levels of sodium. A 1998 review of bottled water found that sodium content varied from brand to brand, with lower levels in North American products and higher levels in European products. Check labels to be sure.

Healthy Water Habits

- Start the morning off right by drinking a glass of water as soon as you wake up (before coffee!).
- Carry a water bottle wherever you go so you are not tempted to grab sodas and other sugared beverages.
- Switch to sugar-free coffee, tea, or sodas. Caffeine free is also a good idea.
- Order water with lemon at restaurants.
- Drink a glass of water before each meal or snack.
- If you're at home, keep a half-gallon pitcher of water in the refrigerator.
- Set goals for yourself. For example, drink one cup of coffee then switch to tea or water. Stick with tea instead of soda.

Tasty Ways to Work with Water

- If you like the tingle of carbonated sodas, try club soda, seltzer, or sparkling water with a splash of fruit juice.
- Dilute fruit juice half and half with water.
- Add slices of lemon, lime, or orange to water.
- Check out the recipes at perrier.com

Beverage Sense

- Alcohol should be used in moderation - the Dietary Guidelines for Americans calls for no more than one drink per day for women and two per day for men. Less is better.
- Beverages are the number one source of sugar in the American diet. It is surprising how many calories one large beverage can contain when it is sweetened with sugar. A 32 ounce soda is upwards of 300 calories.
- Some studies indicate that beverage calories may not actually register as calories, causing most individuals to consume too many calories in a day. Over time this may add up.

By Hollis Bass, MEd, RD