



# Water & hydration



**Health**



**Wellness**



**Nutrition**



**Support**

# Introduction

Water makes up around 60 per cent of our bodies and it's vital for the body to function day-to-day.

It's important we drink regularly to keep our body working effectively. Any drink will provide us with some water and promote hydration, but water is the best choice as it hydrates us without any calories or added sugars.

Other drinks that add to our fluid intake include:

- Fruit juice
- Tea and coffee
- Sports and energy drinks
- Milk

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## Why is drinking water an important part of a balanced diet?

Water is important for our body to function as best it can. Water makes up your blood, it keeps your heart pumping and your brain working.

We lose water when we visit the toilet, when we sweat and even, in small amounts, when we breathe. The body loses water throughout the day and to keep hydrated we need fluids from food and drinks.

Fluid includes not only water, but also other drinks such as:

- squash
- fruit juices
- soft drinks
- milk
- dairy-free alternatives
- plant-based drinks (such as coconut water and soy drinks)
- tea and coffee

Water also comes from some of the more natural foods we eat such as fruit and vegetables, soups and stews. Foods contribute around 20 per cent of our total fluid intakes.

## How much fluid do we need?

It's recommended we drink at least 6-8 glasses of water each day, which is around two litres. Different cup and glass sizes make it harder to be exact, but you don't need to worry too much if you are using a typical sized mug or glass.

You may want to increase how much fluid you drink if the weather is warmer than usual, or if you are doing more physical activity than usual.

## What type of drinks should we have?

### Water

Water is the best choice as it hydrates us without calories or added sugars. For flavour, try adding some slices of fruit to a large jug of water in the fridge, or add sugar-free squash. This means you will have a refreshing drink handy when you feel thirsty, especially in the warmer months.

### Fruit juices

Natural fruit juice contains vitamins and minerals from the fruit. Look for 'not from concentrate' on the label for the best choice without added sugars. You get less fibre than eating a whole piece of fruit due to the processing into a juice, however these drinks are still good for you in moderation. Be careful to only have one small glass per day as more than this can lead to drinking lots of excess sugar. One small glass can count as one of your five-a-day.

## Tea and coffee

Caffeine found in tea and coffee can make us produce more urine and dehydrate us faster, but drinking a couple of cups a day does not seem to affect hydration.

Avoid adding sugar to reduce calories and sugar levels. Shop-bought coffees can also contain high calories, sugars and fats, and other hot drinks such as herbal teas, hot chocolates and malted milks can contain sugars and fats too. This will increase their calorie content and potentially lead to dental problems.

## Fizzy drinks and flavoured water

These have high levels of added sugars and can increase our risk of type 2 diabetes as well as causing dental problems.

A switch to low calorie and sugar alternatives such as those labelled diet or zero can help you reduce the amount of sugar you drink. However, drinks that have sugar replaced with sweeteners can still be harmful to health. While they can help to reduce how much sugar we drink, the best option is to switch to alternatives.

## Milk

Milk is a dairy food and contains essential nutrients such as protein, B vitamins, iodine and calcium. It's a good idea to choose semi-skimmed, one per cent or skimmed milk to reduce fat.

If you choose plant-based alternatives such as oat, soya or almond milk, choose those that are lower in sugar and that are fortified with vitamins and minerals. Like fruit juices, it's easy to drink too much - so limit yourself to one small glass a day, or poured over cereal.

Drinks with added cream or full-fat milk provide extra calories and fat. Drinks like creamy hot chocolates or coffee shop specials are best considered as treats.

## Sports and energy drinks

Energy drinks can be high in sugars and contain caffeine and other stimulants. An energy drink is mainly energy from glucose (a type of sugar), but it contains added ingredients that claim to 'boost energy' including caffeine, taurine and ginseng. 'Zero' or 'diet' versions of energy drinks are also available, using sweeteners to reduce the calorie content, but still have high levels of caffeine and other stimulants.

Energy drinks are a processed food and should not form part of a healthy, balanced diet. Their benefits are mainly seen in high level performance athletes. Even so, athletes would not be drinking the same manufactured energy drink you see on the shelves in most cases. In most day-to-day routines, drinking energy drinks regularly can cause more harm than good.

Regularly choosing drinks with higher levels of added sugars (such as fizzy drinks, squashes and flavoured waters) can cause dental problems and is also associated with an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes. There are plenty of sugar-free choices available as alternatives. If you are choosing sugary drinks, try to have them at mealtimes to limit any problems with dental health.

## What happens when we get dehydrated?

If we do not drink enough fluids we can become dehydrated. Dehydration can cause us to feel sluggish, have clouded thoughts and affect our mental and physical ability. Even low levels of dehydration can cause symptoms like headaches, poor concentration, tiredness, dizziness, light-headedness and confusion.

When we are dehydrated, our kidneys reduce how much water we lose in urine. This means that the colour of urine becomes darker. Waiting to feel thirsty is not a good enough sign of a need to drink. If we are already thirsty our body is starting to become dehydrated and could be experiencing some of the effects above.

The best way to check hydration is urine colour:

If we are drinking enough, our urine should be **straw or pale-yellow colour**.

If it is a **darker yellow**, we probably need more fluid.

If it is **clear**, we have probably drunk too much.

It's a simple check every time you visit the toilet!

## Can we drink too much water?

It can also be dangerous to drink excessive amounts of water so it's important, as with all healthy lifestyle behavior, to be sensible. It's unlikely to happen because our body send signals from the brain telling us to stop, but it can have serious health consequences when people drink excessive amounts of fluid during endurance exercise or when following extreme detoxing plans.

## Alcohol

Alcohol does not count towards any fluid Intake. It is high in calories and can prevent weight loss or cause weight gain. (One gram of alcohol provides seven calories of energy with zero nutritional value.)

Unlike other food and drink, the energy from alcohol has no specific purpose in our diets and enters our blood stream as glucose for use as energy, or is stored as glycogen or fat. Usually, when we are drinking alcohol, we are not physically active, meaning the high volume of calories and energy we are taking in has no purpose at that time and will be stored.

Alcohol is often drunk alongside food and can affect our food choices. Drinking alcohol alongside meals adds calories to your mealtimes. Even two small bottles of beer will add around 300 calories to your energy intake.

Drinking higher volumes of alcohol can also leave you feeling hungry and add to your calorie intake for that day. It's easy for these calories to add up quickly and excess drinking also weakens our ability to say no to overindulgence. Any good intentions you might have about eating sensibly may be lost once you have had a few alcoholic drinks!



## Do we need sports drinks when exercising?

Physical activity increases the amount of fluid we need. When we increase our activity levels, we need to replace the water we lose as sweat. The extra fluid we need depends on how long we are active, how intense the activity is and whether it is hot or humid.

If you are already well hydrated, drinking water at regular points during your activity should be enough. Water is fine for rehydrating after moderate exercise and most active people do not need special sports drinks to stay hydrated.

However, for high-intensity exercise that last more than an hour (e.g. a marathon or triathlon) sports drinks may be better at replacing the extra fluid lost as sweat. To reduce the number of added calories and unwanted sugars, there are many recipes online to make your own sports drink using fruit juice.

Originally made for people performing high level activity and sport, energy drinks are now marketed to improve concentration, reduce tiredness, and give you a mood or energy boost. If you are drinking these types of drinks to energise yourself, it's better to try to tackle the reasons why you feel low on energy.

It can be helpful to think about parts of your life that might be particularly tiring. Recent events may have triggered your tiredness, such as a bereavement or a new-born baby. It may be your lifestyle or diet that is affecting your tiredness. Turning to highly-caffeinated energy drinks can disrupt sleeping patterns, make you feel wound-up and even more tired.

## Will drinking water stop hunger?

The short answer to this is no. Thirst and hunger are different in our brains. Hunger is the body wanting nutrients and drinking water will not satisfy this need. If you choose to drink other types of fluids such as fruit juices or caffeinated drinks, your body may get some short-term satisfaction because of the sugars and other contents.

However, hunger is better to be satisfied with food and thirst with water. We should also be aware to try and spot cravings, which are different from real hunger. Drinking water or occupying yourself with other tasks while craving foods could be a useful way to distract yourself.

## Final thought

By staying hydrated you will notice an improvement in your energy levels and ability to concentrate. It will also help you reduce stress, be more active and improve your sleep - all key components of a healthier lifestyle.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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