

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Fact Sheet 99-30



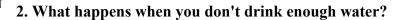
WATER: Fountain of Life - Senior Wellness Series

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Water is the largest single substance in the human body (from 50% to 75%) and we can't live without it. Every body cell, tissue, organ, and nearly every life-sustaining body process requires water. While water is very important to health, the vital fluid is often overlooked in diets--with life-threatening consequences for older adults.

1. Why is Water Important?

- Water helps to control body temperature.
 - Perspiration keeps us cool in hot weather and protects the body against heat exhaustion.
 - Water helps the body to insulate itself against cold weather.
 - Water carries nutrients to body cells and carries away waste.
 - Water promotes better digestion and intestinal function.
 - Water keeps mouth, nose, eyes, and skin moist.
 - Water ensures proper volume of blood.
 - Water keeps the urinary tract flushed out. This is important in reducing the risk of urinary tract infections. Urinary tract infections can be quite serious-even fatal-in an aging person.



Not consuming enough fluids and/or foods that contain water can lead to dehydration. Dehydration is a serious medical condition that often requires hospitalization.

- The first sign of dehydration is usually thirst, which generally occurs when you have already experienced a 1% to 2% loss of body water. Many older people, however, have a diminished sense of thirst, and may be seriously dehydrated before they experience this warning.
- Another easy to check, early sign of dehydration is the color of your urine. It should be clear or pale yellow. Darker urine may indicate you are not meeting your fluid needs.



Other symptoms include:

- dry mouth, dry flushed skin (skin that doesn't bounce back quickly when lightly pinched and released), headache, fatigue, and impaired physical performance.
- increased body temperature, increased but weak pulse rate, and rapid breathing.
- dizziness, increased weakness, and labored breathing.
- muscle spasms, swollen tongue, and delirium.
- poor blood circulation and failing kidney function.

3. Reasons the elderly are more vulnerable to dehydration:

Maintaining adequate fluids is crucial for those over age 60 because dehydration is one of the most frequent causes of hospitalization for the elderly. Approximately half of those hospitalized for dehydration die within a year.

- Aging is associated with decreased kidney function, which is made worse by lower water intake.
- Aging is associated with a reduced sense of thirst. You can drink enough fluid to satisfy your thirst and still be dehydrated.
- Aging is associated with lower amounts of total body water.
- If there is not enough water to release waste products, the body will withdraw fluid from body tissues, increasing the likelihood of dehydration.
- Some older adults experience bladder control problems. To compensate, some avoid drinking fluids to prevent embarrassing accidents.

4. What can I do to meet my needs for water?

Make sure your intake of fluids is 48 to 64 ounces per day. That's a minimum of six 8-ounce glasses per day.

In addition to water, (which is absorbed faster than any other beverage and is calorie free) consider these other sources of fluids:

- Milk
- Soup
- Fruit and Vegetable Juice
- Gelatin (Jello)
- Decaffeinated drinks

Because caffeine and alcohol act as diuretics in the body and increase water loss, beverages such as coffee, tea, liquor and some soft drinks will not contribute to your fluid intake. These should be consumed in moderation.

- Have a glass of water or juice when you first get up in the morning.
- Take a bottle of water with you when you travel anywhere-walking, on the bus, in a car, or in an airplane.
- Whenever you see a water fountain, stop and take a sip.
- Drink water before, after, and during physical activity.
- Give yourself "water breaks" throughout the day, instead of or in addition to, coffee breaks.
- Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day because they have a high water content.

Be especially careful about maintaining adequate fluid intake in the following situations:

- With illness involving fever, diarrhea, nausea, and/or vomiting.
- In very hot weather, especially if you have no air conditioning.

INCONTINENCE

Urinary incontinence can become a serious problem as we age. It can have significant medical and social consequences. The problem is estimated to affect as many as 30% of older adults and is more prevalent in women than men.

If you are one of the people who don't drink enough fluids because you fear embarrassing bladder control situations:

- When away from home, make frequent restroom visits, even if you don't feel the need. In other words, use every restroom to your advantage!
- Consider adult undergarments for trips away from home if they will make you feel more confident about going out.
- At home, have a urinal or porta-potty handy in your bedroom, living room, or any other room in which you spend a lot of time. If you are uncomfortable having these things out in the open, try tucking them under a table with a long tablecloth, in easy reach.
- If adult undergarments are too expensive to use at home every day, consider using them at home selectively, whenever they work best for you-maybe at night before going to sleep, or when you have company.
- Never forget that dehydration is a much worse fate than embarrassment. Dehydration can kill you, while embarrassment can't. Staying home for fear of embarrassment just isolates you, which can lead to poor health and earlier death.

There are a variety of treatment options for urinary incontinence depending upon the condition causing it. Some treatment methods can be as simple as pelvic muscle exercises. Your doctor can help you select the treatment that is right for you.

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