
Preventing Dehydration in Older Adults

Dehydration occurs when the body loses more water than is taken in or replaced. Dehydration makes it difficult for your body to complete its normal functions. Normal fluid loss happens with breathing, urination/defecation, and sweating. Dehydration can occur quickly in older adults and may lead to serious health conditions.

You may be dehydrated if you experience:

- Dark colored urine
- Frequent urination and only able to pass a small amount
- Dry mouth, coated tongue, cracked lips
- Constipation or small hard stools
- Dry skin and sunken eyes
- Frequent urinary tract infection (UTI)
- Headache
- Confusion, disorientation, combativeness
- Dizziness or lightheadedness after standing up
- Fast heart rate
- Dry eyes
- Low blood pressure
- Low tear or sweat production
- Muscle cramps in arms or legs
- Frequent falls
- Drinking less than 6 cups of liquid daily
- Recent, rapid weight loss
- Change in mental status

You may not have all these symptoms at the same time, but all may be caused by not drinking enough fluids.

Common conditions associated with dehydration:

- Dementia or Cognitive impairment
- Dependence on staff/family for eating and drinking
- Medications: diuretics, phenytoin, lithium, laxatives (not all inclusive)
- Difficult or painful swallowing
- Infection
- Vomiting/diarrhea
- Excessive sweating (during exercise or activity)
- Severe burns/pressure injuries

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- Surgery
 - Excessive laxative use
 - Diuretics “water pill”
 - Fever
 - Decreased thirst perception (not feeling thirsty)
 - Depression/anorexia
 - Limited access to fluids
 - Diabetes Mellitus
 - Renal Dialysis

What can I do to prevent dehydration?

The best way to replace fluids is to drink enough daily and to eat food with a high-water content. Many older people do not feel thirsty and are not aware of the need to drink.

How much should I drink each day?

Fluid needs vary by individual and medical condition. Check with your Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) for your specific fluid needs.

According to the US Dietary Reference Intakes, older adults should aim to consume:

- Male: 16 cups (3.7 L) per day
- Female: 11 cups (2.7 L) per day

What should I drink?

At least half of what you drink should be water.

Other fluid choices include:

- Calorie-free flavored water/ sparkling water
- Low-sugar fruit or low-sodium vegetable juices
- Milk
- Hot or cold herbal teas
- Hot or cold coffee
- Low sodium broth
- Low sugar ice pops
- Smoothies

Foods with a high-water content:

- Popsicles
- Gelatin
- Ice cream
- Sherbet and sorbet
- Low sodium soup
- Fruits such as watermelon, berries, and peaches
- Vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumber, and zucchini

What should I avoid drinking?

Beverages that can dehydrate you include:

- Caffeinated drinks such as regular coffee, tea, regular sodas, and hot chocolate
- Alcohol
- Soft drinks and sports drinks that are high in sugar
- Canned soups/broths that are high in sodium

Simple ways to drink more and stay hydrated:

- Use large, easy to hold cups
- Leave a glass of fluid at your bedside or sitting area
- Choose a variety of fluids based on what you like
- Drink fluids during and between meals
- Set an alarm or ask a friend/family member to remind you to drink enough fluid daily.
- Stay in a climate-controlled area on hot days
- Add slices of fresh lemon, apple, cucumber or berries to enhance flavor

Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN) Contact Information

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