

New Issues in Hydration

Hydrate. Hydrate. Hydrate. Everywhere you read lately, it's all about hydration. Americans have become well educated about the need to hydrate. The standard of '8 glasses of water per day' is well ingrained, and this is good. Active people have this one down even better than most people, which raises other issues. Don't get me wrong, drinking plenty of water is great for your health, and it is of course essential. But, industrious people we are, we tend to overdo what is good for us. And yes, too much water (too much of any good thing for that matter) will cause problems.

Issue #1: Hyponatremia

Hyponatremia is a condition where there is too much water in the bloodstream and it dilutes the salt content. Normally, your body regulates the amount of salt in the blood within a very tight range. Consuming too much plain water, too fast will lead to dilution. When this happens, your body can't 'hold' water inside the bloodstream, and it seeps into the other tissues of the body, including the brain. This is not good, and most of us have probably done it to some degree at one time or another. At its worst, hyponatremia can lead to death. Each year, a runner or two dies at an event because of this problem. However, there are certainly more cases of this that happen, but go undetected because the person wasn't so ill they sought/attracted attention. And while it is very rare for someone to die from hyponatremia, many people probably suffer from some degree of this condition during events than we may be aware of, given the huge quantities of water that people think they should consume.

Who gets it?

Mainly women who spend 4 hours or more on the course. Why? There are a few theories, but one is that women just take better care of themselves, and therefore drink more water. Also, you can blame it on estrogen. Scientists believe that estrogen affects the way the brain absorbs water. And, the longer one is out exercising, the more they will drink. But, this doesn't mean that a man who walks for 2 hours can't get it either.

What are the symptoms?

Swelling of the hands and feet. Confusion, dizziness, and headache. Nausea and vomiting, shortness of breath and wheezing. Symptoms can be confused with dehydration, and sometimes people are treated for dehydration when in fact they have hyponatremia. The key here is they feel worse during or after treatment.

How do you avoid it?

Learn how much water you really need by doing a simple test: Weigh yourself before you go out. Drink what you normally would, then weigh yourself as soon as you get back. If you gained weight, that means you drank too much. If you lost weight, that's good. Yes, it can be hard to predict how thirsty you may be, or external factors like the weather that influence fluid intake and sweating. But, by getting a good idea of how much water you should drink in a given period of time during exercise, you will have more control. Also, try to avoid taking NSAID pain killers-ibuprofen, allieeve, motrin etc., they can hurt your kidneys and keep them from processing water. And guess what-the amount of NSAIDS people take is directly correlated to time spent in the medical tent,

dealing with hydration issues. Lastly, drink something other than plain water during exercise. Add some electrolytes or diluted sports beverage. You can add a pinch of salt, a pinch of baking soda, and some lemon or lime juice to your water for electrolytes. But, before you start guzzling sports drinks, read on...

Issue #2: Too many Calories

Among other things, we exercise to stay healthy and maybe lose some weight. If your goal is to lose weight, you may want to watch what you drink. Consuming high-calorie beverages with additives like protein may actually keep you from burning fat. Here's how it works: When you exercise, your body uses energy stores to keep moving. Using energy stores uses up those extra stored calories in your body. But, consuming extra energy during a workout will keep this from happening. Rather than using its energy stores during exercise, your body is smart-it will use the newfound source of energy for fuel, and save what you are trying to get rid of for another day. In reality, your body doesn't require any extra fuel during the first hour of exercise. So, be mindful of what you are drinking or eating. Yes, you need something other than plain water, but you don't need a bunch of calories. Select a beverage with good flavor and some electrolytes, and then dilute it in one half to a third. Nearly all sports drinks have an energy source (read: calories!) in them...some more than others.

The key is moderation with hydration, of course. Be mindful of how much you are drinking, and learn how much you really need. And, if you are trying to lose weight, keep an eye out for how many calories you are drinking from sports beverages.

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