

4 Common Hydration Myths

Life is full of daily challenges. Staying hydrated shouldn't be one of them. If you struggle to make sense of the seemingly ever-changing advice on what, when and how much to drink, especially while on the run, join the club. But it's not impossible to sort the facts from fiction. Base your hydration habits on research-based guidelines--not these four common hydration myths--and you'll stay fueled and run strong.

Myth #1: You must drink eight glasses of water a day.

In reality, fluid needs vary widely, both for individuals and on a day-to-day basis. For women, the Institute of Medicines' Food and Nutrition Board's general recommendation is 91 ounces (about 11 cups) of total water daily, which can come from beverages (including caffeinated drinks) and food sources. On average, water and other drinks fulfill 80 percent of our total daily water needs and food supplies 20 percent.

Female runners should include nutrient-rich beverages such as 100 percent fruit and vegetable juices, herbal tea and low-fat milk for calcium, vitamin D and protein. Delivering energy, nutrients and electrolytes, meal replacement beverages and electrolyte replacement drinks are a good option before, during and after prolonged or intense exercise.

Myth #2: It's best to drink like your fast running buddy.

One-size-fits-all rules for drinking during exercise are out. Sweat rates vary greatly among runners, especially during prolonged exercise or in hot weather. How much you need to drink depends on how much fluid you need to replace, regardless of well-intentioned group guidelines. In fact, major authorities like the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) and the American Medical Athletic Association (AMAA) have moved away from giving definitive formulas to runners, especially marathoners, about how much to drink while running.

Take responsibility for yourself. Daily hydration needs are influenced by your physiology, fitness level, running speed, the clothing you wear and the weather. A good rule of thumb: Pay attention to the color of your urine throughout the day. If it's dark yellow, you're not drinking enough. Your bathroom scale can also help. Weigh yourself before and after a run (in the nude is best). If you routinely drop more than two percent of your body weight on a single run (for example, about 2.5 pounds if you weigh 130 pounds), you need to do a better job meeting your fluid needs while running. To find your hourly sweat weight, add the weight lost during a one-hour run with the ounces you drank. The total number of ounces is what you should consume during each hour of running to avoid dehydration.

Myth #3: Drink as much water as possible before a race.

Drinking too much water can lead to more than just frequent trips to the bathroom. Hyponatremia, a dangerous drop in blood-sodium levels that can be life-threatening, results from overdrinking--replacing water without adequately replacing sodium lost through sweat. Dizziness, confusion, swollen hands and feet, a throbbing headache and a bloated stomach during or following prolonged exercise can signal overhydration and a dilution of blood-sodium levels. Rapid weight gain during exercise is a definite warning sign that you're overdrinking.

Female runners are at greater risk due to a smaller blood volume and an increased likelihood of being hyper-vigilant about hydration, especially if following a low-sodium diet. Heavy sweaters, beginning marathoners who tend to run slowly (therefore with more opportunities to drink) and endurance junkies running for more than four hours need to be especially careful about this condition.

To protect yourself from the hazards of both over- and underdrinking, follow the International Marathon Medical Directors Association (IMMDA) evidence-based simple rule: Drink when thirsty. In other words, drink to stay hydrated--don't overdrink. Consume sports drinks (with at least 110

milligrams of sodium in eight ounces) for runs longer than an hour or when appropriate to avoid low sodium levels.

Myth #4: Female runners don't need sports drinks.

Female runners often shortchange themselves by skipping sports drinks or using them incorrectly. If you run longer than 60 minutes at a moderate pace, you need to drink every 15 to 20 minutes after the one-hour mark. Based on 30-plus years of scientific research, experts continue to recommend sports drinks that supply fluid, carbohydrate and electrolytes over water during longer training efforts and races.

A well-designed sports drink should contain sugar (carbohydrate) and an ample amount of sodium. Carbs, stored as glycogen, are your body's preferred fuel during exercise, and are the only fuel it can burn during intense or anaerobic efforts, such as sprinting for the finish line. Your body's glycogen stores are limited, however, so supplementing with a sports drink when you plan to race all-out or push yourself longer than 60 minutes is a real performance booster. Salt is added to improve the absorption of carbs and to help replace the sodium lost through sweat.

Experiment with different sports drink brands to find one that works for you before race day. (Your stomach might not tolerate them all.) If you choose not to consume a sports drink, you still require sodium and supplemental carbohydrate. Carry energy gels (take with water to dilute), and try various electrolyte products such as Nuun tablets to keep up with your sodium needs

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