



6 hydration myths that could be hurting your health

Think you need 8 cups of water a day? Or that coffee dehydrates you? Experts debunk the most common misconceptions about staying hydrated.

Even though water is the most abundant substance in the human body, it doesn't always get the respect it deserves. Nearly half of adults in the U.S. consume less than the recommended amount of water per day, according to a [2023 CivicScience poll](#) of nearly 2,861 people. That's a problem—because staying well hydrated is one of the simplest and most powerful ways to support your health.

For starters, it's essential for body temperature regulation, joint lubrication, digestion, detoxification, nutrient transport, energy production, as well as heart and brain function. In addition, proper hydration is associated with a lower risk of developing chronic diseases, dying prematurely, and being biologically older than your actual age, according to [recent research from the National Institutes of Health](#).

“Hydration is foundational to every cellular function in the body,” says [Dana Cohen](#), a physician specializing in integrative medicine in New York City and co-author of the books *FuelUp* and *Quench*. “Yet many people walk around in a state of low-grade dehydration and don't even realize it. This chronic underhydration can lead to fatigue, headaches, poor concentration, joint pain, and even cravings that are mistaken for hunger.”

To help you avoid those pitfalls, here's the truth behind some of the most common myths about hydration.

Myth: Adults should consume 64 ounces of water per day.



“That eight-cups-a-day idea has really stuck in our cultural memory, but the truth is, hydration needs vary from person to person based on size, activity, and environment,” says [Wendy Bazilian](#), a nutrition and wellness expert based in San Diego and host of the *1,000 Waking Minutes* podcast. In fact, [the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) has more specific guidelines for men and women. To stay adequately hydrated, women should consume 11½ cups of water per day, and men should have 15½ cups per day.

When the heat and humidity climb during the summer, you probably need to drink more than that, especially if you’re spending time outside or exercising. Even when you’re not visibly sweating, your body loses water through breathing and evaporation from the skin’s surface—especially in hot, humid, or high-altitude environments. That’s why hydration is important, even during light activity or even rest.

Keep in mind: Mild dehydration can increase your risk of developing a heat-related illness such as heat cramps, heat exhaustion, or heat stroke, Cohen says. “Hot weather accelerates fluid loss through sweat even when you’re not visibly dripping. That means your hydration needs increase significantly in the summer. A good rule of thumb is to add at least 16 ounces of fluid for every hour you’re outdoors in the heat or exercising.”

Myth: Thirst is a reliable sign that you need water.

“While thirst is a helpful signal, it’s more like a later warning light—like that E signal on your gas gauge [on your car’s dashboard]—than a real-time indicator of what’s going on now,” Bazilian says. “By the time you feel thirsty, you’re already a bit behind” on hydration. This is especially true for older adults, as their thirst mechanism becomes less sensitive with age, increasing the risk of dehydration.

At any age, even a slight drop in hydration—such as a 1 to 2 percent loss in body water—“can impair physical and cognitive performance,” Cohen says. [A study](#)



involving male college students found that mild dehydration had adverse effects on their measures of vigor (a.k.a., energy), mood, short-term memory, and attention; fortunately, rehydration quickly improved their fatigue, mood, reaction time, and thinking abilities.

A better measure of hydration status, according to Cohen, is how frequently you need to use the bathroom. “Ideally, we are meant to pee every two to three hours during our waking hours,” she says. While you’re there, take note of the color of your urine: If it’s clear to light yellow, that’s a good sign. (Don’t panic if it’s fluorescent yellow: That could be the result of taking certain medications or supplements, Cohen says.)

Myth: Drinking fluids is the only way to stay hydrated

About 20 percent of your fluid intake comes from foods with a high water content—fruits, vegetables, soups, stews, and the like, Bazilian notes.

Summer staples, such as watermelon, cucumbers, tomatoes, berries, grapes, and leafy greens, are all great options; even smoothies and cold soups like gazpacho count.

Myth: Chugging water at once keeps you well-hydrated

Believe it or not, it is possible to overhydrate if you drink more fluid than your body can flush out. It’s a condition called hyponatremia, where sodium levels in the body become dangerously low because there’s too much fluid in the body. This can lead to symptoms such as nausea, headache, confusion, muscle weakness, and, in severe cases, seizures. “It’s rare and more common in endurance athletes,” says Bazilian. But it’s something to be aware of—and to try



to prevent by drinking enough fluids without overdoing it and making sure you're consuming enough sodium.

In general, it's more effective to consistently sip water throughout the day than to guzzle it in one go. "This approach ensures better absorption and utilization by your body," says Bazilian. "To make this habit stick, set reminders on your phone to take some sips every hour or use a water bottle with time markers to pace your intake."

Myth: Drinking coffee or caffeinated tea can make you dehydrated

"This one really needs to be put to rest," says Bazilian. "Coffee and tea can absolutely count toward your hydration. After all, coffee and tea are made of water." Similarly, it's a myth that sparkling water (or seltzer) is dehydrating. It's just as hydrating as still water, so if you prefer bubbly water, that's fine.

Myth: Sports drinks are better than water during workouts

Not necessarily. It depends on how long and hard you'll be exercising and what the conditions are, says [Leslie Bonci](#), a sports dietitian and owner of Active Eating Advice in Pittsburgh. If you're going for a short walk or exercising in cool weather for less than an hour, water is fine. But if you tend to sweat heavily or if you're exercising intensely or for more than an hour, it's best to add some electrolytes (namely, sodium and potassium) from a low-sugar electrolyte powder, Bonci says.

Keep in mind: It's not enough to hydrate during the workout; you should start before you exercise. Think of "fluid as part of your internal equipment—if you exercise in a dehydrated state, you'll be slower, weaker, and you'll fatigue faster," Bonci says. She recommends drinking 20 ounces of fluids an hour before a



workout because it takes that long for the fluid to leave the stomach and get to the muscles that will be powering your session. During the workout, Bonci recommends taking a few gulps of fluid every 20 minutes to stay hydrated, followed by an additional 20 ounces afterward.