

Driven to drink....water?

Water is an essential nutrient for life and must be continuously replaced due to ongoing loss. It is essential for digestion, carrying nutrients around the body, elimination of waste products and in helping the body to control its temperature. Most people know that they should drink 6-8 glasses of water a day, but is this recommendation still applicable?

What about other drinks.....there are so many beverages available on the market including cold drinks, fruit juices, coffee, tea, milk, sports drinks – what can you have to quench your thirst? Some of these drinks may contribute significantly to total daily energy intake and with increasing rates of obesity and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes worldwide, inappropriately high intake of beverages with added sugars is becoming a serious public health concern.

In healthy adults fluid intake is controlled by thirst, but instead of drinking water, the ideal thirst quencher, many people prefer caffeinated drinks or alcohol which if drunk in excess has a diuretic effect! This article provides general guidelines on how much you should drink per day and gives you a better idea of what kinds of beverages can form part of a healthy varied diet.

How much do you need to drink?

Total fluid intake is highly variable for individuals as it is influenced by a number of factors including weight, body composition, activity level, environmental conditions, body temperature and various conditions such as illness, pregnancy and breastfeeding. However, a guideline for healthy adults under “average conditions of energy expenditure and environmental conditions” based on recommended caloric intake is 1ml/kcal of fluid per day. For the average man, this translates into approximately 2900 ml (12 glasses) of fluid per day and for the average woman about 2200 ml (9 glasses) of fluid per day. A glass is equivalent to 250 ml.

What should we drink?

The bulk of your fluid intake should preferably be made up with water and drinks without added sugars.

Water

Plain tap or bottled water is the ideal drink for your fluid requirements, as it provides no additional energy and contains various minerals (calcium, magnesium, fluoride). Men should drink at least 6 glasses of clean, safe water per day and women at least 4 glasses. Children should drink water according to thirst. At school, they should be encouraged to meet their fluid needs with water and the availability of sweetened cold drinks, juices and sport drinks should be limited.

Tea and coffee

Moderate intake of caffeine is not associated with heart disease, hypertension or high blood cholesterol. To keep caffeine intake at moderate levels (about 300 mg/day), adults should limit their intake to no more than 4 cups of coffee per day or 6 - 8 cups of tea per day. This should preferably be enjoyed with fat free or low fat milk and little or no added sugar. Rooibos, honeybush and other herbal teas are good caffeine-free alternatives which also provide various antioxidants and phytochemicals that may have health benefits.

Milk and ready-to-drink milk or yoghurt beverages

The latest research shows that low fat dairy may protect against heart disease, obesity and insulin resistance. There is also evidence that some of the bioactive substances in milk, especially fermented milk, may help lower blood pressure. Calcium intake from dairy sources has also been associated with a reduced risk of stroke. As part of a balanced, varied diet everyone should include 2 portions of dairy on a daily basis. This is equivalent to 2 cups of low fat or fat free milk per day. If you prefer ready-to-drink milk and yoghurt beverages - many are high in fat and sugar, so look for low fat, no added sugar varieties. To follow the prudent guidelines and reduce saturated fat, it is safe to introduce low fat or fat free dairy products for children over the age of 5 years – especially if they are overweight.

Cold drinks

Fruit and vegetable juice (100% juice with no added sugar)

Fruit juice has a high sugar concentration and is energy dense (even if it has no added sugar) so can lead to weight gain if consumed in excess. They also lack the fibre that is present in whole fruit, so rather have a piece of fresh fruit instead of juice. Vegetable juice is generally healthier as it contains less sugar, but watch out for the sodium content if you have high blood

pressure. Fruit and vegetable juice should be limited to no more than 1 glass a day. Remember that 1 glass of fruit juice is equivalent to 2 fruit portions!

Sweetened cold drinks

These drinks contain hardly any beneficial nutrients, are energy dense and contribute to increased energy intake. Regular consumption of these drinks is associated with dental caries, obesity and type 2 diabetes. Also, watch the amount of caffeine in these beverages! Intake should be limited to no more than 1 glass a day but should be avoided by diabetics and inactive overweight adults and children.

Sports and energy drinks

These are beneficial for active people taking part in endurance events (i.e. strenuous exercise for more than 1 hour) as they help replace mineral and fluid losses. Many of the sports drinks that are available make false claims about their supposedly performance-enhancing attributes. Ideally, people needing to use energy drinks should consult with a dietitian or biokineticist to assess the amount of water and type of fluids that should be taken before, after and during exercise. As sports drinks contain *at least* half the energy of sweetened cold drinks, they should be avoided by inactive overweight adults and children. Also, avoid any of the drinks in this range that contain caffeine or other stimulants.

Diet or artificially sweetened cold drinks

A glass of low-cal or diet drink contains less than 1 kCal compared to an ordinary glass of sweetened cold drink which provides at least 100 kCal! So in terms of energy content, an artificially sweetened drink is a better choice – especially for those who are overweight. Bear in mind that they are a source of artificial sweeteners, additives and preservatives, so use it in moderation - up to 4 glasses a day should be fine.

To conclude, remember that your body cannot survive without water and that fluid intake is vital for your health and well-being. Be guided according to your thirst, drink adequate amounts of water and choose other options in moderation.

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