

# Wellness report

**Stay happy, healthy  
and hydrated**



## **Water The liquid of life**

Earlier this year, the scientific world was buzzing with news that evidence of water had been discovered on Mars, fuelling more speculation that the red planet once supported life. Considering the variety of liquid refreshments available here on earth, wouldn't it be easier to look for empty pop bottles, flattened juice boxes and crushed coffee cups scattered across the Martian landscape? Now those would be sure signs of life!

With so many options at your disposal, you might believe that "plain old water" has lost its number one status amongst popular refreshments. In a world where juice, coffee, soft drink and beer companies battle for the hearts, minds and taste buds of consumers, don't forget the benefits of good ol' H<sub>2</sub>O. For the purposes of staying cool and feeling well, cold clear water may be the best, healthiest choice as you enjoy all your favorite summer activities.

## **You really are what you drink**

The human body consists mostly of water. Health Canada says water makes up about three-quarters of the brain, 83 percent of the blood and roughly 70 percent of the rest of the body. An average-sized human being contains approximately 37 litres of the wet stuff. It's possible to survive for a month or more without food, but life without water would be very short and miserable. Apart from oxygen, there's nothing more critical to human survival than an adequate supply of safe, clean drinking water.

Water plays an essential role in almost every function the human body performs. It helps protect the immune system, maintains the balance of electrolytes in cells, aids digestion of food and medicines, removes wastes, transports nutrients, regulates temperature, prevents fatigue, enhances physical performance and it's good for your skin, too. But as you go about your day, your body is constantly losing

water through perspiration, respiration and other bodily functions. If you aren't replacing that fluid, you risk becoming dehydrated.

## Fill 'er up...and check the fluids

People need to consume about two and a half litres of water each day, although this varies depending on the types of activities a person is involved in and the temperatures he or she is exposed to. Water is obtained through both the liquids you drink and the food you eat. Since your body needs water even before you actually begin to feel thirsty, make a habit of taking regular drinks of water throughout the day to stay hydrated and feeling well. And remember, drinks containing caffeine, alcohol, sugar or sodium can actually contribute to dehydration by reducing the efficiency of the body's heat regulating system. They also contain extra calories that you won't find in water.

## Dehydration

When your body loses more fluids than it receives, you can experience minor headaches, dizziness, fatigue and confusion—all symptoms of dehydration. In more severe cases symptoms can include sunken looking eyes, sleepiness, constipation, lack of urination, dry skin, rapid breathing and an increased pulse rate.

Dehydration can take the fun out of your activities and, if ignored, it can lead to serious medical conditions including heat cramps, heat exhaustion and the potentially deadly condition of heat stroke. Failure to drink enough fluids before and during exercise and work, particularly during the hottest and most humid times of the day and year, is a major factor contributing to these serious heat-related illnesses.

## Heat cramps

Heat cramps are painful muscle spasms that strike during strenuous activity in high heat and humidity. Usually the

muscles being exercised (legs, arms etc.) are the ones that spasm. Heat cramps can be treated by cooling the body down, drinking fluids and gently stretching and massaging the affected area.

## Keep it close at hand

As you go through your day, remember to keep water within easy reach. Purchasing water in convenient, easy-to-carry bottles or carrying refillable water containers might help you to drink more water when you're out and about this summer.

## Heat exhaustion

People suffering from heat exhaustion have normal or slightly elevated body temperatures accompanied by headache, dizziness, weakness, confusion, irritability and nausea. The skin might be cool and moist and can look either pale or red in appearance. More serious than heat cramps, if victims of heat exhaustion do not recognize their symptoms and take measures or receive treatment to let their bodies cool and recover, the condition can progress to heat stroke.

## Heat stroke

Heat stroke is the most serious heat emergency, caused by the combination of inadequate fluids, strenuous exercise/activity and high temperatures. At this stage, the individual's body loses its ability to regulate temperature through normal methods such as sweating. Victims of heat stroke may vomit, faint and display unusual, irritable and combative behaviour including refusing to drink fluids. The victim's skin might appear red as the body sends more blood to the skin in an effort to shed heat. The pulse might be rapid, weak and irregular. Breathing might be fast and shallow. Heat stroke causes body temperature to climb as high as 41°C (or 106°F) –a point at which brain damage and death may result if immediate emergency assistance is not received.

For healthy individuals, drinking plenty of fluids is the easiest and most important step to take in order to help avoid these conditions. Scheduling strenuous work and exercise for the cooler parts of the day, taking frequent rest breaks and learning to identify the symptoms in yourself and others (including children and the elderly) are valuable steps you can take to ensure a happy, healthy and hydrated summer.

## Not only in the summer

The effects of dehydration aren't just a concern during the hottest months of the year. Your body loses moisture during the winter too, especially when bundled up to enjoy outdoor activities. Don't forget to drink fluids when shovelling snow, snowshoeing, skiing, skating, tobogganing and other cold weather activities.

The dieticians of Canada Web site ([www.dieticians.ca](http://www.dieticians.ca)) suggests drinking water at all meals and when snacking. This habit not only keeps you hydrated but it can help minimize cravings for food since sometimes the "munchies" are actually only the "thirsties."

Sources: Health Canada; MayoClinic.com; The Canadian Red Cross Society. *First Aid: The Vital Link*. Yardley, PA: StayWell Health Company Ltd., 2001; Environment Canada; University of Iowa Health Care; American Diabetes Association; The Dieticians of Canada; United Nations; IDEAfit.com.

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