

how we live

ADVICE, INSPIRATION &
A LITTLE PEACE OF MIND

HEALTH

REFRESHER COURSE

Study up on how to hydrate properly! Because there's way more to it than just "drink more water."

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AMERICA IS RIDING a wave of hydro-mania. You may be on it yourself. Many of us are unable to leave the house without a jug of filtered water. We feel parched if we haven't guzzled cup after cup. We've amassed such a huge collection of aluminum bottles, we need solutions for storage. (A certain insulated tumbler went so viral earlier this year that shoppers fought over it. Let us ponder the irony of collecting multiples of an item that's durable enough to last a lifetime.) And for the truly committed, there is now a movement toward "optimized hydration." Gwyneth Paltrow, fitness influencers, and Silicon Valley tech execs are extolling the virtues of alkaline water, which is higher in pH and supposedly reduces acid in the bloodstream. Bottles and filtration devices (or bottles *with* filtration devices) claim to "restructure" H₂O for maximum bioabsorption. Instead of choosing between fizzy and flat, you can opt for esoteric, engineered versions—artesian alkaline, anyone? If our well-digging ancestors could see this, they'd laugh until they dropped their wooden buckets.

Water is undoubtedly important. It's literally who we are, accounting for between 45% and 75% of our body weight. (The more muscle you have, the more water you contain.) It's necessary for nearly all physiological functions, including regulating our body temperature, lubricating our joints, and protecting our organs and tissues. But even though we may cling to our bottles like toddlers with sippy cups, the key is to ensure we're hydrating *effectively*. If you're thirsty to know what's actual science and what's someone trying to hose you, read on for the lowdown.

The best way to gauge your hydration is by tracking bathroom breaks: The ideal is once every two or three waking hours.

Drinking Water Shouldn't Be the Only Way You Hydrate

You've heard the notorious eight-by-eight rule: Adults should drink an eight-ounce glass of water eight times a day. Thought to have originated in a 1945 report from the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council, the guideline is based on caloric intake, calculating one milliliter of water for every calorie consumed. (For a 2,000-calorie diet, that's around two liters, or close to 68 ounces.)

What you may not have heard is that the eight-glasses rule is outdated, like the four food groups and Pluto's planetary status. Why? First, hydration is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, says Dana Cohen, MD, a doctor of integrative functional medicine

in New York City and coauthor of *Quench*. "You'll need more water if you're losing a lot of fluids through sweat; if you're taking dehydrating medications, like laxatives or diuretics; or if you're not getting enough produce in your diet."

Which brings us to the second reason eight by eight does *not* equal great: When we eat right, approximately 20% of our daily fluid comes from foods—mostly vegetables and fruits. "The fiber in these foods acts as a sponge, slowly releasing liquid into the body and providing longer-lasting hydration," Cohen says. Produce also

contains electrolytes—like sodium, calcium, and potassium—which keep our digestive, nervous, cardiac, and muscular systems working efficiently. Cohen recommends adding cucumber slices or macerated berries to your H₂O to infuse it with both flavor and electrolytes. Polish off the produce at the bottom of the glass and you'll get even more water, and a dose of fiber to boot.

She also recommends eating plenty of other fruits and veggies with high water content, such as tomatoes, spinach, mushrooms, citrus, and cantaloupe. And milk drinkers, rejoice: It's more hydrating than water, according to a May 2020 study in the journal *Nutrients*. "Milk has sodium, potassium, and calcium, which help the body absorb water," says Sarah Schlichter, MPH, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Frederick, Maryland. Caffeine lovers, there's even good news for you: Tea and coffee can offer some hydration, if you sip with restraint. "After about four cups, caffeine's diuretic effect outweighs any hydrating benefits of the fluid," Cohen says.

Your Body Tells You How Much Water You Need

The best way to gauge whether you're sufficiently hydrated is to monitor your pee, Cohen advises. Not its color, though. "I wouldn't strive for crystal-clear pee," she says, debunking yet another hydration myth. "That means you're probably low on salt and electrolytes." (You want a bit of color, like the pale yellow of straw.) Instead, track the frequency of your bathroom breaks: The ideal is once every two or three waking hours, Cohen says. "If you've been sitting all day and you haven't peed three times, then you're probably a little dehydrated." So drink as much as your body needs to stave off thirst, but don't force down fluids as if you were suffering a perpetual flu.

Electrolyte Powders Can Help—in Moderation

We naturally lose electrolytes when we sweat, so if the weather is sweltering or you're intensely exercising, a powder can help replenish your body's supply, Cohen says. "Just choose one with no added sugar or fake coloring." She likes Cure's Hydrating Electrolyte Mix (\$24 for 14 packets; curehydration.com), which is plant-based and contains no artificial sweeteners. Limit your consumption to a packet a day, Cohen adds. In rare cases, you can overdose on electrolytes, which may cause problems such as confusion, irritability, and heart arrhythmia.

You Can Probably Skip the Alkaline Water

Trendy alkaline water is, by definition, less acidic than the regular stuff. It can occur naturally in springs or be created by adding minerals or ionizing with an electric current. Fans believe alkaline water can boost hydration, fight inflammation, and strengthen the immune system. But there's no research to support the benefits, Cohen says. "Some people have told me they've switched to alkaline and feel better, but maybe they're making better hydration choices in general."

It's Possible to Be Overhydrated

Consuming large amounts of fluid can flush out essential minerals. Kidneys can excrete only about one liter (34-ish ounces) an hour. Drinking more than that can lead to electrolyte imbalances and water intoxication, a disruption of brain function that can cause nausea, headaches, or, in extreme cases, unconsciousness and even a coma. The point? Drink up—as long as you're not gulping too much of a good thing. ■

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