

Water — The Body's Most Valuable Liquid Asset



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It is easy to ignore water most of the time. Unless we are thirsty, we probably take water for granted. Maybe we think about drinking water when the weather is hot, or when we are exercising. No matter what the weather or situation, it is time for us to give water — one of the body's most essential nutrients — some well-earned attention.

We all know that water is vital. It is the most abundant substance in our bodies. On the average, an adult's body weight is 55 to 75 percent water. That means each of us contains about 10 to 12 gallons of water. How much water comprises each of us varies from person to person. For example, the leaner a person is, the higher the proportion of water in her or his body. Males carry a higher percentage of water than females, because males bodies are more muscle. Muscle tissue is about 73 percent water, while body fat is about 25 percent water. Even bones are 22 percent water.



Water plays a number of important roles in the body. It regulates body temperature, carries nutrients and oxygen to cells, removes waste, cushions joints and protects organs and tissues. Since the brain is 70 percent water, blood is 82 percent water, and the lungs are nearly 90 percent water, it is easy to see how even mild dehydration can cause problems.

It doesn't have to be hot, humid weather outside for our bodies to need water. We don't need to have just completed a grueling gym workout to need hydration. In fact, cold weather leads to an increased need for fluids. Why? When the temperature drops, the body works even harder to maintain a normal temperature. In addition, heated room air can cause skin to lose moisture. It is important to note that thirst is actually a symptom of dehydration. To avoid problems brought about by dehydration, experts encourage drinking water before, during and after working out, and before we experience thirst.

Not only is water a necessary part of every system in the body, and in all weather conditions, but the water we do have is also lost from the body in a variety of ways. Water is expelled from the body by the skin as perspiration, by the lungs as water vapor exhaled, by the kidneys as urine and by the intestine in feces. That's why health professionals agree we need 8 to 12 glasses of water a day to maintain healthy, adequate hydration.

A recent national consumer survey released in May 1998 reveals that Americans may be drinking too little water. When surveyed, 3,000 consumers responded that the average American only consumes 4.6 servings of water a day. Another concern noted is that many of the popular beverages Americans drink are somewhat dehydrating.

These drinks, including coffee, carbonated soda with caffeine, tea, beer and wine, may actually have a diuretic effect on the body. The survey, conducted by Yankelovich Partners for the Nutrition Information Center at The New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center and the International Bottled Water Association, clearly demonstrates the need for increased public education about the benefits of proper hydration and the problems even mild dehydration can cause.

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