

Hydrate for Longer, Healthier Life

Half of adults do not drink enough fluids

By Chris Iliades, M.D.

IF YOU DRINK ENOUGH WATER and avoid dehydration, you may live a longer and healthier life, says a new study from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI).

The researchers followed 11,000 middle-aged adults and measured their hydration by regularly testing blood levels of the electrolyte sodium and comparing health results between people who had normal but lower hydration and those who had normal but higher hydration.

The study was published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*.

“Our cells and organs need the proper amount of water because it affects the internal chemistry of cells and also so our organs, such as the kidney, can filter out various toxic substances that our body produces,” explains Steven Austad, Ph.D., endowed chair in healthy aging research in the department of biology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

“Sodium is a marker for how much water we have in our blood. More water will dilute the sodium and lower sodium values. Less water increases its concentration and causes higher values.”

Sodium in the blood, called serum sodium, is measured in millimoles per liter (mmol/L).

The research team used fasting serum sodium levels above 142 to 146 as the high normal level (less hydrated), and 137 to 142 as the better hydrated level.

Compared to people in the better-hydrated group, less-hydrated people had a 39% increased risk of developing a chronic disease, a 21% increased risk of premature death, and a 50% higher risk of having a biological age higher than their actual age.

HOW MUCH WATER?

According to NHLBI, nearly half of adults do not drink enough to meet the daily fluid recommendation of 6 to 9 cups for women or 8 to 12 cups for men.

The amount of water you need changes from day to day depending on your health, activity, and temperature.

“Generally, if you don't have enough water your body will make you thirsty to correct the problem,” says Austad.

“There probably isn't an optimal amount, because your body regulates its hydration status quite well. The more you drink above what your body needs, the more you will lose in urine.”

You are probably drinking enough water if you are not thirsty, and your urine is colorless or a very pale yellow.

Besides water, you can get hydration from fruits and vegetables and fluids like milk, juice, or soda, but you should avoid hydrating with sugar-sweetened, alcoholic, or highly caffeinated drinks.

Because your body gets rid of excess fluid through urine, it is hard to overhydrate unless you have a health problem, such as congestive heart failure or kidney disease.

“You can overhydrate, although it isn’t easy. The take-home message is that being in the middle is optimal, due to how well your body regulates hydration, rather than how much you drink,” says Austad.

BOTTOM LINE

The study concludes that proper hydration may slow down aging and prolong a disease-free life, but the authors caution that further research is needed to confirm the findings.

Serum sodium is frequently part of routine blood testing, and the researchers suggest that a fasting serum sodium above 142 may mean you and your doctor should evaluate your fluid intake.

The key takeaway is that it is important to maintain good hydration.

Is it too simple to say that drinking more water will help you live longer? “Yes, it is,” says Austad.

Your body should do a good job of regulating your hydration, as long as you drink enough water.