

The cup runneth over: Rules of hydration

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It's not hard to feel awash in nutritional advice.

Rarely a week passes that we don't read about a new study that contradicts last month's study.

Although experts might debate the health value of, say, bacon-and-egg breakfasts, a fallback position for most any dietitian is urging people to consume adequate fluids to be fully hydrated.

Yet even the standard recommendation of eight glasses of water per day has been challenged in recent times.

"The research question has been raised whether there is actually scientific evidence for drinking 8 to 10 glasses of water each day," said JoAnn Hattner, a clinical nutrition professor at Stanford University and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

The answer is a definitive "we don't know for sure." Not surprisingly, nutritionists are still not about to play down the importance of daily fluids.

You still consistently read or hear that we need 8 to 10 cups of fluids each day for optimal health. Another common suggestion is to divide your body weight in

pounds by two. That's the number of ounces you need each day.

What is surprising is the range of beverages that count toward your daily hydration totals.

"What's really changed (among nutrition researchers in the last few years) is caffeine is not considered as severely dehydrating," said Monique Ryan, an Evanston-based nutritionist and author of the new book "Sports Nutrition for Endurance Athletes" (Velo Press, \$19.95). "Caffeinated drinks can count as about half water."

That means your 16-ounce morning coffee can "count" as one of the recommended 8 to 10 cups of water. Or half of your soda can is equal to 6 ounces of water.

It appears the substance caffeine itself is not the diuretic agent once believed, though it does prompt most people to urinate more frequently. The result is the 50 percent fluid loss.

Ryan is quick to add that this reversal of thinking is "not a directive to drink caffeine." Coffee, for instance, stimulates both the bladder and central nervous system.

Coffee drinkers need to be aware of how caffeine affects them.

What's more, regular soft drinks lurk with excess sugar (10 teaspoons per 12-ounce serving) or additives (especially in diet pops).

Cutting your soda intake could be the healthiest change you make this year.

"My rule of thumb is no more than four sodas per week," said Jackie Berning, assistant professor of nutrition at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and nutritionist for several Denver-area professional sports teams.

Berning said some beverages, such as juice, milk, soy milk and herbal teas, can match water ounce for hydrating ounce.

She and other nutritionists mentioned provisos about juice (drink 100 percent varieties, consume only 6 to 8 ounces daily because of high caloric content, don't use it to quench thirst) and milks (require more work in the digestive tract than water).

You can estimate caffeinated drinks at about 50 percent equivalent of water (the less-caffeinated green tea is slightly higher).

Alcoholic drinks don't fare so well on the fluid-replacement index. Most nutritionists suggest not counting any of your favorite beers, wines or cocktails toward

the daily water mark.

Researchers say alcohol blocks a hormone that otherwise helps the body stay hydrated.

In fact, a frequent suggestion is to consume a full glass of water for every alcoholic serving. Ryan said consuming alcohol after exercise may inhibit muscle recovery.

In any case, Hattner said each of us needs to get in the flow of our personal health and energy levels.

"You are the best judge of whether you are getting enough fluids in your day," Hattner said. "It's more than monitoring your thirst. If you are feeling lethargic, it may well be from lack of hydration."

A quick biology lesson: Water flushes toxins out of the body and keeps your organs functioning at peak levels.

One of water's primary duties is maintaining adequate blood supply to the skin.

It is indeed scientifically documented that a typical human can't survive more than a few days without water.

One reason is that even the sedentary individual loses 1.5 to 2 liters of water daily.

At rest, urine output represents our greatest losses, while sweat-

ing during physical activity can double fluid losses on any given workout day.

Thirst is not a reliable gauge for your fluid needs, especially as we grow older because the body's thirst mechanism becomes less attuned.

An adult can more easily confuse the sensations of hunger and thirst than children.

A better indicator of fluid intake is urine color.

"If it is pale lemonade or no color," Berning said, "then you are getting enough fluids. If it is darker, like apple juice, you are a 'hurtin' unit.'"

Many of Berning's clients, pro athletes included, regularly take multiple vitamin/mineral supplements.

Their urine color can often be much darker or yellower, particularly if the product has high amounts of B vitamins.

The idea is maintaining a consistently pale urine color, except for the first thing in the morning, which tends to be darker.

There are no set "healthy number of times" for daily urination. Bladders differ as much as personalities.

But if you go at 9 a.m., then not again until 2 p.m., you need to consume more fluids.

On the other hand, Berning said, if you are getting up twice a night or more, it is best to seek medical attention.

The overnight frequency could be a sign of diabetes or other troubles.

Ryan suggested that the properly hydrated person will empty "four full bladders" each day.

Moreover, the best approach to hydration is drinking water throughout the day and not too much at any one time.

A standard strategy is 8 ounces every one to two hours (especially if you are constipated).

Otherwise, drinking too much fluid at once, even a pint or two of spring water, simply overloads the kidneys without actually hydrating the body.

"It's always better to space it out," Ryan said.

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