

Preventing dehydration in older adults

What is dehydration?

Your body “dries out” because you do not drink enough fluid, or you lose too much fluid or both. Fluid can be lost with vomiting or diarrhea. This can occur quickly in older adults and the effects can be harmful.

What will be different if I am dehydrated?

You may notice that you:

- have a dry mouth, or your tongue may be coated
- are constipated, that is, your stools may be hard and small
- have dry skin
- have dark coloured urine with a possible strong odour

- go to the toilet often but only pass small amounts of urine
- may be at risk of developing a urinary tract infection
- have a headache
- may have a change in your thinking (confusion)
- difficulty concentrating

- are dizzy or lightheaded which may be caused by your blood pressure dropping when you stand up. This could lead to a fall.
- have a fast heart rate
- have dry eyes

You may not have all of these symptoms, but all may be caused by not drinking enough fluids.

What can I do to prevent dehydration?

The best way to replace fluids is to drink. Many older people don't feel thirsty, so you may not be aware of the need to drink.

What should I drink?

Good choices of fluid are:

- water, fruit/vegetable juices and milk.
- juices should never be the only fluid you drink. Milk can cause constipation in some people. At least half of what you drink every day should be water.

Poor choices are:

- canned soups, which can be a hidden source of high salt.
- soft drinks and sports drinks, as they are high in sugar and can cause dehydration.
- caffeinated drinks such as tea, coffee and hot chocolate because they may actually cause water loss and dehydration. Decaffeinated products are a better choice.

Alcohol can also add to dehydration. The use of both caffeinated and alcoholic drinks should be limited.

Simple ways to drink more

- use large, easy to hold cups
- leave a glass of fluid at your bedside
- choose a variety of fluids based on what you like
- have more fluids between meal times, as well as with meals
- friends and family can remind and encourage you to drink

Check with your doctor first. Sometimes your doctor will limit fluids if you have severe heart, kidney or liver disease.