

Good Housekeeping

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How much WATER do you need?

Dr Sujata Kelkar Shetty takes a look at the myths and truths around water and etches out a more realistic picture



Much of the water that we need can be gathered from the food that we eat as well as tea, coffee and fruit juice

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Water is an essential part of our daily diet. The body needs water to perform its basic functions, such as waste removal, maintaining blood flow and regulating temperature. However, how much water is a must? Everyone, from our mothers to our neighbours, can quote the "eight-glasses-per-day" rule. And they'll warn you that drinking juice, alcohol, tea and coffee doesn't count. Apparently tea, coffee and alcohol are diuretics (substances that increase the flow of urine), and this negates their water content. I tried the eight-glasses-of-water-a-day rule; but since on most days, I would remember the rule only at bedtime, I would drink the last few glasses just before I slept. Of course, this entailed more bathroom visits than I cared for, in the middle of the night! But I persisted. This is a small price to pay for my health, I thought, and just as I took my vitamins every day, I downed the water.

Is drinking that much water every day really necessary? Research revealed that Dr Heinz Valtin, professor of physiology and an expert on kidney function at Dartmouth Medical School, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, USA, spent close to a year looking for articles on the subject and couldn't find a single published article that described daily water requirements. In Delhi, Ritika Samaddar, chief dietitian, Max Devki Devi Heart and Vascular Institute, says, 'There are no standard "one-size-fits-all" recommendations for drinking water. Your water intake depends on your lifestyle, age, and the climatic conditions you live in.' Plus, beverages of all kinds, and raw fruits and vegetables add to the water in your diet, so it isn't necessary to drink large quantities of plain water.'

Why water quality is important

In India, the quality of water that you drink is very important. This holds particularly true in the summer months, when waterborne diseases, such as hepatitis, gastroenteritis, amoebic dysentery and typhoid, rear their heads. There are many ways of ensuring that the water you drink is safe. Boiling the water is the simplest way to ensure that it is potable, says Ritika Samaddar. (You need to boil water for at least 20 minutes.) Several water purification systems are available in the market, and they're all effective if serviced properly and regularly.

Why drinking too much water can have its downside

Inconvenience: Drinking eight glasses of water a day can mean several visits to the bathroom. If this is at night, then this can interrupt your sleep and cause fatigue the next day. This can be a concern in the elderly, who are particularly susceptible to sleep disturbances.

Expense: If you choose bottled water as your source of drinking water, your spends will shoot up.

Possible exposure to pollutants: If you are drinking too much water, and the water isn't pollutant-free, this can lead to the build-up of toxic substances in your body. Researchers still don't know what are the long-term effects of this.

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Old myths about drinking water

Thirst means you are already dehydrated: There is no scientific data to show that this is the case. On the contrary, researchers have found that when thirst kicks in, it is your body's method of preventing dehydration.

Dark urine means dehydration: Dr Heinz Valtin's review published in the *American Journal of Physiology* (August, 2002) says that the notion that dark urine equals dehydration doesn't hold true. On the contrary, he says that the warning is "alarmist and false in most instances".

Water has to be had plain: Given that we live in a tropical climate, keeping our body hydrated is important. However, water is first and foremost a hydrating agent. Its other suggested medical benefits are unproven. As a hydrating agent, it can be taken directly or in beverages such as juices, fresh lime water, coffee, tea and even alcohol. It's the



main constituent of salads; so if your lunch comprises a summer salad and a cold soup, you may not need to drink any water with your meal at all. If you're thirsty, get yourself a glass of water. But generally speaking, a glass of water with your meal and a couple of additional glasses should suffice for your daily requirements.

Water helps prevent a host of diseases: A number of studies have been done to look at the role of water intake in preventing diseases such as cancer of the urinary bladder, colorectal cancer and fatal coronary heart disease. So far, the data is far from conclusive and there are conflicting reports.

Water helps drop calories: There are some studies that have been conducted on how drinking a glass of water before a meal can promote the feeling of fullness. However, it has not been established if these feelings of fullness lead to a reduction in appetite, and even if they do, whether the feelings of fullness last at all.

Constipation can be tackled by drinking more water: A popular notion holds that drinking water will help tackle constipation. There is no scientific data in Western medicine that proves this.

When should you drink large quantities of fluids?

If you exercise vigorously: To replace lost fluids, drink lassi, fresh lime water, or Gatorade, during and after your workout.

When suffering from diarrhoea, high-grade fever and/or vomiting: Since the body loses a lot of water during such illnesses, it becomes important that water and electrolytes be replenished.

During long flights: Since airplane travel is dehydrating, it's important to hydrate yourself regularly with fluids while flying.

In the summer months: In hot cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata) drink coconut water, lassi and fresh lime water.

When should you regulate your water intake?

Consult a doctor if you're suffering from any of these:

- Kidney ailment or renal failure
- Grade two or three of liver disorders
- Severe heart problems (such as congestive heart failure)
- Indications of oedema*

WATER INTOXICATION?

The PBS News Hour in the USA reported on July 30, 2001 about a woman who drank herself into fatal hyponatremia or water intoxication after trying the recreational drug Ecstasy. This was because the drug makes one feel thirsty and also has strong antidiuretic effects, so the woman was unable to excrete the copious amounts of water that she drank, in her urine. However, dietician Ritika Samaddar points out that for healthy individuals with a normal kidney function, it would take about 10 litres of water consumed in a short span of time to put them at risk of water intoxication.

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