



THE SIMON FOUNDATION  
FOR CONTINENCE

# fact sheet

PROMOTING CONTINENCE - CHANGING LIVES

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER

One pundit has claimed that “our bodies are just a way for water to get up and walk around.” Humor aside, it is important to recognize that at every stage in life, adequate hydration is necessary for good health. Adequate hydration means that your body has sufficient water in the right locations and contains the right concentrations of electrolytes such as sodium and potassium.

The benefits of water are numerous. Water helps to: keep skin healthy; flush toxins from the body; cushion and lubricate joints; keep bowels regular; maximize mental function; reduce the risk of kidney stones and urinary tract infections; and regulate body temperature. Water comprises approximately two thirds of the body's weight, although due to changes in the body's tissues as we age, the water content will vary. For instance, children's bodies have approximately 80% water, whereas men and women over the age of 60 show an average

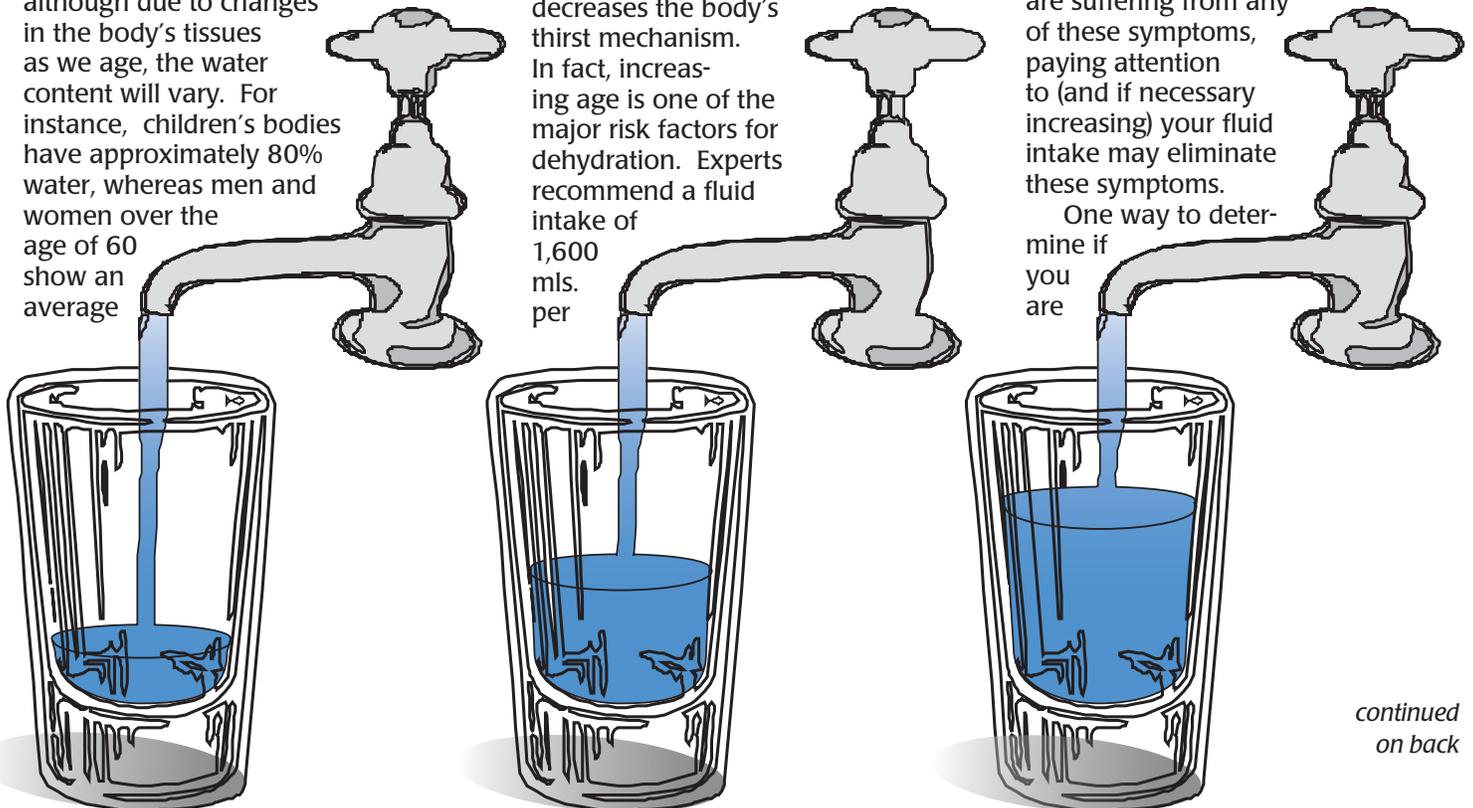
of 51% and 43% water content respectively. The decrease in the body's water content as we age is due to loss of lean muscle tissue which holds body water better than fat (muscle tissue is approximately 75% water). There are also diseases which are more common as we age such as heart and kidney disease and diabetes to name a few, which can affect the fluid balance in the body. Small fluctuations in fluid intake can cause proportionately more dehydration in a senior citizen than in a child.

Understanding how to determine if you are drinking enough water is the first step in maintaining a healthy body. First of all, it is important to drink before you become thirsty. This is especially important for older individuals because age decreases the body's thirst mechanism. In fact, increasing age is one of the major risk factors for dehydration. Experts recommend a fluid intake of 1,600 mls. per

24 hours. With the increased number of people who are overweight in America, using a rule of 1/2 oz. of fluid per pound of body weight may be a better indicator of appropriate fluid intake. Any food item which is liquid at room temperature such as ice cream, popsicles, or gelatin should also be calculated as part of your daily fluid consumption.

The body loses water in many different ways: through the skin by perspiration; through the kidneys by urine production; and through the lungs by exhaled water vapor. The human body reacts to insufficient fluid intake in many different ways, including: headaches; kidney stones; low energy and fatigue; dark urine; constipation; muscle and joint soreness; and the misperception of feeling hungry. If you are suffering from any of these symptoms, paying attention to (and if necessary increasing) your fluid intake may eliminate these symptoms.

One way to determine if you are



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drinking enough is by the color of your urine. Urine the color of water is good and the color of lemonade is OK; however, if your urine is the shade of apple juice you need to drink more fluid and if it is dark like Coca Cola you may need to seek medical attention for dehydration.

Other indications of adequate hydration include: skin that retains moisture and is supple; mouth and lips which are adequately moist; and eyes which have sufficient tearing. Including a variety of fluids in your diet each day may help you to consume adequate amounts of liquid. However, fluids other than water should be substituted in moderation. Soft drinks and sports drinks are high in sugar and may contribute to dehydration as the kidneys attempt to dilute the sugar. Although nourishing, many soups contain a high sodium content. Some individuals find that milk is constipating and an excess of juices can cause diarrhea and alterations in sodium and potassium levels. Caffeine and alcohol act as diuretics.

Dehydration is not only bad for maintaining a healthy body, but can become a medical emergency. Older individuals and their caregivers need to be especially vigilant in guarding against dehydration. People between the ages of 85 and 99 are 6 times more likely to be hospitalized for dehydration. A medicare study indicated that 18% of those over 65 who were hospitalized for dehydration died within 30 days.

The prevalence of underhydration and dehydration in long-term care is estimated at 33%. Underhydration can make older adults more

susceptible to urinary tract infections, pneumonia, pressure ulcers, confusion and disorientation.

For individuals at risk of dehydration, increased fluid intake can be made more appealing in several ways. Keeping fresh ice water at the bedside; using larger cups of water to accompany the taking of medications; using pretty glasses which aren't too heavy; and adding slices of lemon to flavor a glass of water may all help to make keeping up one's fluid intake more enticing. Even reminding people that cool water can be very refreshing may also tempt them to drink more often.

Adequate hydration is also very important for individuals who have bladder and/or bowel problems such as incontinence. Although for people who are fearful of being wet in public it is a natural tendency to want to decrease fluids, risking underhydration or dehydration is not an appropriate response to incontinence. An adequate amount of urine is needed in the bladder to stretch the bladder walls, activating nerve receptors which transmit signals through the spinal cord to the brain.

These signals warn you when your bladder is becoming full and give you time to seek a toilet. Chronically reduced fluid intake may lower an individual's awareness of bladder sensations. Dehydration may also increase constipation and could result in bowel impaction. In fact, what many individuals experience as bowel incontinence, is really an impaction in the bowel, blocking its normal action and leading to leakage which seeps past the impaction.

The International Organization for Standardization reports in their journal that in December of 2003 the UN General Assembly proclaimed the years 2005 to 2015 the International Decade for Action, "Water for Life", beginning with World Water Day on March 22, 2005. The UN called upon organizations and governments to deliver a coordinated response to make "Water for Life" a "Decade for Action". There are still almost 1.1 billion people worldwide who have inadequate access to water.

Slowly, the importance of water and adequate hydration is beginning to get more attention in the media. This attention is increasing public awareness through articles which include interesting facts like the following (taken from the 2004 Water Quality Report "Drinking Enough Water?" - City of Evanston, Illinois): 75% of Americans are chronically dehydrated; in 37% of Americans, the thirst mechanism is so weak that it is often mistaken for hunger; even mild dehydration will slow down one's metabolism as much as 3%; lack of water is the number one trigger of daytime fatigue; the average daily requirement for treated fresh water in the United States is about 40 billion gallons; and one glass of water shuts down midnight hunger pangs for almost 100% of dieters studied in a University of Washington Study.

Is water getting enough attention in your life? You might keep track of your water intake for a few days to be certain. You may find out that the next time you are feeling tired or hungry, simply increasing your water intake will provide a quick and inexpensive remedy.

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**The Simon Foundation** is a non-for-profit educational organization dedicated to helping people with incontinence.

For a sample copy of *The Informer* and a list of Fact Sheets, send \$1.00 with a business-size self-addressed envelope to:

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