

In many ways, keeping well hydrated during exercise is more important than eating the right food. Fluid losses of just 1-2% of body weight can significantly impair performance. Unfortunately, thirst is a poor indicator of hydration status, and by the time an athlete is experiencing dizziness or confusion, they are already severely dehydrated. Individuals have different fluid requirements which depend largely on their own individual sweat rates and internal body cooling mechanisms.

The best way to determine your own rate of fluid loss is to simply weigh yourself before and after a training session. Remember to account for any food or fluid you have consumed while exercising. A kilogram of weight loss represents 1 litre of fluid lost. In order to rehydrate effectively, you need to replace 1 ½ times the amount of fluid lost. For example, if you have lost 1 litre of fluid, you will need to drink 1.5L of water.

The day before a big event is the right time to organise yourself in terms of fluid requirements. Make sure that you drink plenty of fluid the day before an event, but it is also important not to go over board. Aim for ~500mls to an extra litre than your normal fluid intake the day before race or long cycle.

During your cycle replace fluid regularly and aim to consume 600-1000mls for every hour you are out cycling. When you have finished your session, aim to replace all fluid you have lost, and remember it is 1.5 times the total amount of body weight you have lost. If you are unsure of how much fluid you have lost, another less technical way is to check the colour of your urine. Clear urine indicates you are adequately hydrated. Try to avoid any caffeine containing substances immediately after racing as these have a diuretic effect, removing more water from the body. They will also turn your urine clear so you will not be able to tell if you are dehydrated.

Water is always a good choice of fluid but sport drinks such as Gatorade and Powerade can also come in handy, especially for endurance events such as long distance cycling and triathlon. 'Sports drink' refers to a group of beverages that were originally formulated in the United States for a local gridiron team to prevent dehydration in hot conditions. It was proposed that by adding the mineral salts that are lost in sweat, rehydration may occur more rapidly than by rehydrating with water alone. The result was a beverage that contained a small amount of carbohydrate along with the mineral salts; sodium and potassium. In the forty years since the original sports drinks were used, the formulation has changed significantly with present day sports drinks containing much higher levels of carbohydrate (between 4-8%) to help fuel the body, and levels of the minerals sodium and potassium scientifically shown to improve the uptake of fluid in the gut.

In elite level sport, sports drinks have an important role in keeping athletes hydrated. Sports drinks are also particularly useful in endurance events longer than ninety minutes as the carbohydrate serves as a useful energy source for the muscles. The body only has enough stored carbohydrate in the muscles and the liver for ninety minutes of intense activity. For this reason, in events or training sessions lasting longer than this period of time, a fuel need to be ingested during the session to prevent the athlete completely running out of fuel and "bonking" or "hitting the wall".

For the average person who is not training at this level of intensity, water is more than adequate, especially if you are trying to lose weight. Remember sports drinks do contain calories from the carbohydrate content and hence if you are cycling to lose weight, consuming a sports drink may simply replace all the calories you have burnt during your cycle!