- Dehydration

The clinic



WOMAN'S GP DR HELEN WALL ON HER TOPIC OF THE WEEK

Subtle signs you're not drinking enough



It's easy to become dehydrated in the warmer months without realising...

It seems obvious to say that when you feel thirsty you should drink more, but by the time thirst kicks in most of us are already dehydrated. To put this into context, a 70kg adult can lose around 700-1,400ml of fluid (1-2% of body weight) before feeling thirsty.

Like most things in health, it's better to prevent dehydration by sipping fluids regularly than cure it, but this doesn't come easily to everyone. Fortunately, there are some subtle signs to watch out for that dehydration is setting in.

DID YOU KNOW?

Struggle to drink enough throughout the day? Fluids in soups, fruits and vegetables can also help increase your hydration levels. The NHS recommends watermelon, cucumber and lettuce, yogurt and even desserts, such as jelly, ice cream and custard.

FAILING TO FOCUS

Trouble concentrating may not seem like an obvious sign but even mild dehydration (1-2%) can affect your mental clarity, concentration and short-term memory. As we lose fluid, the amount of blood we carry reduces, meaning our hearts must work harder to pump less blood around our body quickly to our cells. This extra effort can increase your heart rate and make you feel more tired – it can also lead to dizziness and headaches.

Feeling sluggish, fatigued and headachy may be an early sign of mild dehydration. You may also notice a dry mouth. Saliva helps control the balance of bacteria in our mouths and a dry mouth with less saliva can mean bad breath. Have you ever heard the tip if you're wanting to snack, try having a glass of water? Dehydration can mimic hunger signs, especially cravings for salty and sugary snacks, as the fluid loss alters your blood sugar levels.

TEMPERATURE RISING

We know that sweating more can speed up dehydration, but being dehydrated can also inhibit your ability to sweat, which is a method of cooling you down. In this way, being dehydrated can make you feel warmer. It can also limit the amount of fluid available in the bowel, so as a result your stools can become harder to pass leading to constipation. If your bowels are feeling sluggish you may well need more fluid on board.

There are of course some physical signs, although these are often more obvious later. Sunken eyes, dry skin, dry lips and mouth are key signs of potential dehydration that shouldn't be ignored.

Most healthy adults should aim for around two litres of fluid intake a day. If, like me, water isn't your first choice of beverage – fear not – tea, coffee, low-fat milk and other non-alcoholic fluids count too. If you're very active, breastfeeding, ill or in a hot climate, your needs may be significantly higher, so bear this in mind.

FACT OR FICTION? YOU CAN NEVER HAVE TOO MUCH FIBRE

False. Excess fibre (found in foods such as fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds) can inhibit the absorption of zinc, iron and magnesium – although this shouldn't be a problem if you eat lots of other healthy foods too.

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