



Healthy Eating for Elders: Fluids¹

Linda B. Bobroff, Luisa Oliver-Cordero, and Emily Minton²

Why is water so important?

More than one half of an adult human body weight is water! Water brings nutrients to the cells in our bodies and removes waste. Our bodies cannot function without an adequate water supply.

Water helps to:

- convert food into energy.
- regulate our body temperature.
- protect and cushion our vital organs.
- keep us "regular."

What happens if we don't get enough water?

When we take in less water than we lose, our body becomes dehydrated. We lose water in urine, sweat, and feces. We replenish our body's water supply by drinking water and other fluids. Foods, especially fruits and vegetables, also provide our bodies with water.

Low fluid intake or dehydration can cause:

- difficulty swallowing;
- dry mouth due to low saliva production;
- headaches;
- fatigue;
- loss of appetite;
- dry eyes;
- muscle cramps; and,
- kidney stone disease.

Why is fluid intake a concern for older persons?

Dehydration is common in older people. One third of healthy persons 65 years or older have mild dehydration! This may be due to some of these factors:

- people not realizing they are thirsty;
- decreased ability to concentrate urine;
- a self-imposed fluid restriction.

1. This fact sheet, FCS8569, was developed with funding from the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, in partnership with state, county, and local agencies. September 1999. Revised: April 2006, November 2009.

2. Linda B. Bobroff, PhD, RD, LD/N, associate professor, Luisa Oliver-Cordero, former ENAFS nutrition educator/trainer, and Emily Minton, BS, ENAFS program coordinator; Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences; University of Florida; Gainesville 32611-0310.

We need to drink enough water and other fluids to stay hydrated. Since older people may not realize they are thirsty, they may need to plan their fluid intake.

How much fluid should we drink?

The majority of older persons need to drink about 6–8 cups of fluid every day. The amount needed depends on a number of variables:

- your body weight;
- activity level;
- your overall health;
- air temperature.

Factors that increase fluid needs are:

- eating high fiber foods or taking a fiber supplement;
- taking certain medications, especially diuretics ("water pills");
- hot weather;
- and/or, vigorous physical activity.

What kinds of fluids are best?

Drink fluids that you enjoy. Limit those that are high in added sugars or sodium. Drink water and some of the following high-nutrient drinks every day:

- fruit juices (100% juice, about 6 fluid ounces a day is enough)
- vegetable juices (low-sodium types)
- low-fat milk
- vegetable or milk-based soups

Tips for drinking more water

You can get more water by doing some of the following each day:

- Welcome the day with a cup of water.

- Drink a cup of water about 1/2 hour before meals.
- Drink a full glass of water when you take your medication! This is best for most medications, but check with your pharmacist.
- Drink 1–2 cups, or more if needed, of water during and after spending time outdoors.
- Fill a water bottle and carry it with you during the day.

Which of these ideas will work for you?

For More Information

Speak with a registered dietitian (RD). You can find an RD in your area through the American Dietetic Association at their toll-free number 1-800-877-1600 ext.4844 (available in English or Spanish), or by visiting their website at <http://www.eatright.org>.

Call your county Extension agent. Look for "Cooperative Extension Service" in the blue pages of your telephone book; in Florida, find your county Extension office at the University of Florida IFAS Extension website: <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/map/>.

Other reliable websites:

- National Agricultural Library – <http://nutrition.gov>
- National Library of Medicine – <http://medlineplus.gov>
- U.S. Department of Agriculture – <http://www.usda.gov/cnpp>