

Dehydration: it's not just a summer thing By Jill Timm, MSPT, LAT, CMTPT

When we think of dehydration, most of us only think about those hot, steamy days of August. It brings to mind the sweat beading on our forehead with the sun pounding down on us. But it's January, and unless we are reading this sitting on the beach in the Caribbean, dehydration is probably the last thing on our minds. Here's a warning to you: dehydration can happen just as easily during the winter as it can during the summer! Plus, the effects can be just as harmful.

The problem is that we do not feel as thirsty when we are cold. Normally, the thirst center is triggered with sweating and blood volume loss. Since we are not necessarily sweating in the winter, we don't activate the hypothalamus, which is the thirst center. Without this, we don't feel thirsty and we become dehydrated.

We complicate all of this with age. Around 60 years old, our body fluid decreases by as much as 18-24%. Muscle mass is lost and replaced by fat cells which contain less water. The thirst mechanism becomes less sensitive. Thinner skin means that we can lose more water. Altogether, this puts the older body at an increased risk for dehydration.

Dehydration can lead to an increased risk of falls, kidney stones, decreased resistance to colds and flus, and exhaustion. Each of these can cause someone to stop drinking water. Appropriate fluid intake is eight individual 8 ounce glasses of water per day. It is okay to stop 1-3 hours prior to bedtime. While water is the best fluid to keep us healthy, other options can include 100% juice, soups, ice cream, milk, puddings, decaffeinated drinks, and nutritional supplements. Fruits and vegetables can contain large amounts of fluids, as well. It is best to avoid dehydrating beverages such as coffee, tea, sodas, and alcohol. If you are thinking, "I don't want to be in the bathroom all night!", you are not alone. This is another reason that people restrict the fluid intake. However, dehydration leads to a concentration of urine which becomes very irritating to the bladder. This leads to an irritated bladder, and ironically results in more trips to the bathroom.

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