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Is Plain Water Okay?

What's better for staying hydrated: sports drinks or plain water?

By [James Garrick, MD](#)

May 8, 2000 -- That depends on whether you're concerned about hydration or performance. If simply staying hydrated is your main goal, plain old water should do the trick. If performance is the issue, you might want to try a sports drink.

Most people get dehydrated because they wait too long to start replenishing lost fluid. As a general rule, you need about a pint of water per half-hour of exercise. If it's especially hot out, you may need even more. Don't wait until you get thirsty to start drinking; by that time you're already on your way to feeling parched. To stay ahead of your thirst, drink up even before you start your workout.

If your main goal is to keep up a steady pace for two hours or more, a sports drink is definitely a smart idea. It contains sugars that will help you maintain your energy and perform at your best. (By the way, most of us get enough salt in the food we eat, so a sports drink isn't usually necessary to replenish a loss of salt.)

Before you head out the door with a sports drink, be sure you've mixed it properly. Most are too concentrated and will draw water into your stomach (through osmosis), keeping it from hydrating the rest of your body. I recommend diluting them one-to-one with water. Each brand is a little different, so shop around until you find one that goes down easy. Then get ready to roll!

James Garrick, MD, is an orthopedic surgeon and director of the Center for Sports Medicine in San Francisco. He is co-author of *Sports Injuries: Diagnosis and Management* and the upcoming *Anybody's Sports Medicine Book*, available in June.

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