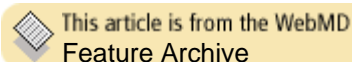


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Sports Drinks Go Way Beyond Gatorade

Just Drink It

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WebMD Feature Archive

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April 19, 2002 -- They told us to "just do it," so we're doing it. Hiking, biking, mountain climbing -- you name it. But as the weather heats up, dehydration can be a big problem. You've got to drink *something*, and enough of it, or you risk heat stroke or another heat-related illness.

One friend thinks nothing of bicycling 70 miles -- over some pretty grueling hills -- with a water bag on his left shoulder, a squirt-bottle of honey on his right, and a few snacks at break times. Gives him plenty of fuel and hydration, he says.

Another friend -- a tennis fanatic -- swears by berry-flavored Gatorade, even though he dilutes it. "I think it gives me a competitive edge," he says.

The fact is, a sports drink may be your best choice if you're an intense athlete. A new study shows that athletes can stave off fatigue 37% longer if they drink sports drinks -- the kind with electrolytes and carbohydrates in them. They also run faster, have better motor skills, and are mentally sharper, says the study, which appears in the April issue of *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*.

But these days, there's more than plain old Gatorade on the store shelves. Sports drinks, energy drinks, bottled waters, fitness waters -- who's to know? We don't all sweat like pigs when we exercise. To help you sort it all out, WebMD contacted a number of sports nutritionists.

Caffeine Drinks: Bad Idea

Soft drinks are never a good option during sports. "They have no electrolytes, so they really don't replenish what the body needs," says Chris Carmichael, who heads a training company for personal coaches in Colorado Springs. He's also the personal coach of three-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong.

"Sports drinks help you sustain energy or recover from your workout," he tells WebMD. "Soft drinks are really poor at doing either of those."

Like soft drinks, the so-called energy drinks like Red Bull "have huge amounts of caffeine -- which can be a diuretic and can even have a laxative effect," says Leslie Bonci, MPH, RD, director of Sports Nutrition at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. This can worsen the dehydration often experienced with heavy exercise.

Sports Drinks 101

When you exercise heavily, you lose water and salts in your sweat. Gatorade was an advance over water because it added a number of electrolytes that were lost in sweat, says Steven Zeisel, MD, PHD, chairman of nutrition at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Today's true sports drinks are still the classic Gatorade -- packed with the electrolytes potassium, magnesium, calcium, and sodium to provide energy during intense workouts -- as well as competitors such as Cytomax, Allsport, and Accelerade.

Take a swig of an electrolyte drink, and you make sure your body doesn't overheat. You also give yourself an energy source -- one that only serious athletes need, Zeisel tells WebMD. "The amount of sugar in the sports drinks is relatively small compared to the amount of sugar someone burns in exercise. But clearly, it's better than nothing as a calorie source."

"Certainly for people engaging in exercise in a hot environment, an electrolyte replacer can be a lifesaver," he says.

Electrolyte drinks provide the body with fuel in the right quantities, so you don't get an upset stomach, says Bonci. "And the carbohydrates, sodium, and potassium help move fluid more quickly out of the body and into the muscles, where it needs to be during exercise."

Electrolyte-Plus Drinks

Any add-ons to the basic electrolyte drink -- whether it's choline, creatine, or something else -- "makes no difference to anyone except the professional who cares whether they finish 1/10th or 1/000th of a second faster than the other person," says Zeisel. "Most everyday athletes are not going to notice or care about it. But for the person who won the Boston Marathon, it might be what they need."

As far as the protein drinks, unless you're biking the Tour de France or something similarly grueling, your body isn't going to require that protein surge, Zeisel says. "If you're eating protein in your meals, that's much more protein than you'll get in the drink. [The drinks are] supposed to spare your muscle protein, but in reality it's a marginal gain. Just eating protein will do that much."

However, "recovery drinks" like Endurox R-4 help endurance athletes recover from the workout, says Carmichael. "Recovery drinks have a heavier mix of carbohydrate replenishment, they replenish glycogen stores, and usually have antioxidants to help reduce muscle stress and protein to help muscle recovery."

"Even the weekend warrior who plays a lot of tennis one day, who is sore the next day, could benefit from drinking one within the first 30 minutes after playing. It helps reduce muscle stress," Carmichael tells WebMD.

Testing The Waters

For less-intensive exercisers, water will do, says Zeisel. Don't even bother with bottled water -- good old tap water works just fine. "When it comes to exercise and water loss, tap water and bottled water are all the same."

However, a new "fitness water" called "Propel" has a light flavoring and a few antioxidant vitamins -- not intended to help performance, just to add to a healthy diet, says Mary Horn, MS, a research scientist at the Gatorade Sports Institute.

Flavorings in beverages "encourage the exerciser or athlete to drink more and stay hydrated better," she tells WebMD. "Our research shows that both the taste and sodium content of Gatorade naturally make people drink more of it, so they get the hydration they need."

It's totally true -- that little bit of flavoring does make people hydrate themselves better, says Bonci. "Water doesn't have any flavor, it's flat. Water alone can cause people to stop drinking before their fluid needs are met."

Carmichael's not convinced. "I don't think [fitness water] does a great job of anything. It's a marketing ploy," he tells WebMD.

How Much Should You Drink?

If you're exercising intensively in the morning, "A sports drink is better than being on empty," says Bonci. "Most people find they do better if they have something, but it can be solid or liquid form."

While you're exercising: "Thirst is not a good indicator at all," says Bonci. "If you're thirsty, you're already dehydrated."

Drink something every 15 to 20 minutes, if possible: Since that's not possible in all sports, you may have to drink more before you exercise, so you have enough in your body.

Don't try something new before competition: "That's a recipe for disaster," Bonci tells WebMD. The body needs to get used to new fluids, so do it really, really gradually."

Don't drink sports drinks during couch-potato hours. "Those extra calories!"

Don't drink fruit juices before exercise: "They're a very, very concentrated form of carbohydrate," advises Bonci. "That means you might get an upset stomach or a laxative effect. You'll be running, but not necessarily on the field."

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