

SPECIAL REPORT #2

Am I Overdosing On Water?

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Everywhere I travel I see people carrying lots of water. I am frequently asked: "I drink 8 glasses of water a day. Is this enough?" It is more than enough and is often too much – to the point of being detrimental to your health! Here are the highpoints of a recent news article:

Experts challenge myths about water consumption, Benedict Carey, *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 18, 2000.

Talk about a drinking problem.

On the one hand, it seems that more people than ever are drinking heavily: College students bring bottles into classrooms; office workers nip from jugs all day long. Many of us are like Gerri Johnson, a 56-year-old kindergarten teacher living in Manhattan Beach, Calif., who says, "I carry a bottle of water throughout the day, and I'm always drinking. It flushes out my body, and it's good for my skin."

At the same time, some **nutritionists insist that half the country is walking around dehydrated.** We drink too much coffee, tea and sodas containing caffeine, which prompts the body to lose water, they say; and when we are dehydrated, we don't know enough to drink.

Can it be so? Should healthy adults really be stalking the water cooler to protect themselves from creeping dehydration?

Not at all, doctors say. "The notion that there is widespread dehydration has no basis in medical fact," says Dr. Robert Alpern, **dean of the medical school** at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

Doctors from a wide range of specialties agree: By all evidence, **we are a well-hydrated nation.** Furthermore, they say, the current infatuation with water as an all-purpose health potion — tonic for the skin, key to weight loss — is **a blend of fashion and fiction and very little science.**

Consider that first commandment of good health: Drink at least **eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day.** This *unquestioned rule* is itself a question mark. Most nutritionists **have no idea where it comes from.** "I can't even tell you that," says Barbara Rolls, a nutrition researcher at Pennsylvania State University, "and I've written a book on water."

Some say the number was derived from fluid intake measurements taken decades ago among hospital patients on IVs; others say it's less a measure of what people need than a convenient reference point, especially for those who are prone to dehydration, such as many elderly people.

Kidney specialists do agree on one thing, however: that the **8-by-8 rule is a gross overestimate of any required minimum**. To replace **daily losses of water**, an average-sized adult with healthy kidneys sitting in a temperate climate needs **no more than one liter** [One liter is the equivalent of about four 8-ounce glasses] of fluid, according to Jurgen Schnermann, a kidney physiologist at the National Institutes of Health.

According to most estimates, that's roughly the amount of water most Americans get in solid food. In short, though doctors don't recommend it, many of us could cover our bare-minimum daily water needs without drinking anything during the day.

The way it's almost always stated, in books, magazines and newspapers, the 8-by-8 rule specifically **discounts caffeinated beverages. This is flat wrong**. Caffeine does cause a loss of water, but only a fraction of what you're adding by drinking the beverage. In people who don't regularly consume caffeine, for example, researchers say that a cup of java actually adds about two-thirds the amount of hydrating fluid that's in a cup of water.

Regular coffee and tea drinkers become accustomed to caffeine and lose little, if any, fluid. In a study published in the October issue of the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, researchers at the Center for Human Nutrition in Omaha, Neb, measured how different combinations of water, coffee and caffeinated sodas affected the hydration status of 18 healthy adults who drink caffeinated beverages routinely.

"We found no significant differences at all," says nutritionist Ann Grandjean, the study's lead author. "The purpose of the study was to find out **if caffeine is dehydrating in healthy people who are drinking normal amounts of it. It is not.**"

The same goes for tea, juice, milk and caffeinated sodas: One glass provides about the same amount of hydrating fluid as a glass of water. The only common drinks that produce a net loss

of fluids are those containing alcohol — and usually it takes more than one of those to cause noticeable dehydration, doctors say.

Now, take a close look at a survey released this May by the International Bottled Water Association. Based on interviews with 2,818 adults in 14 U.S. cities, the association concluded that "although an overwhelming majority of Americans know that drinking water enhances health, most don't drink as much per day as they should."

Yet, according to the association's own numbers, Americans say they drink an average of 6.1 glasses of water, 3.7 servings of soda or sports drinks, 3.2 of coffee and tea, 1.9 of juice, 1.7 of milk, and one alcoholic drink each day.

All told, after subtracting the alcoholic drink, that's a sopping 15 glasses of hydrating fluids, well above the already exaggerated "minimum." **And it doesn't even include the three or four glasses contained in solid food.**

In addition, researchers have good evidence that people who develop kidney stones can lower their risk of further problems by drinking more fluids. **"Those are the only patients we would tell to drink more water,"** Alpern says.

Of course, if you're healthy, and you're laboring over the stair machine, playing basketball, or even gardening in a hot, dry climate, you're going to need a lot more than a liter to keep you hydrated. But you hardly need a nutritionist or a doctor to tell you that.

"You're dying of thirst," Alpern says. **"The thirst mechanism is one of the most powerful and sensitive of all the body's regulatory processes."**

Robertson says that this mechanism almost always kicks in when we've lost between 1 percent and 2 percent of body water.

"There's no evidence that this 1 to 2 percent decrease is harmful in any way," he says. "Thus, there is really no need to 'prevent' this slight decrease in body water by drinking a specified amount in the absence of thirst."

What if you're sweating and, for some reason, don't or can't drink? That's when the body will begin to squeeze water from its own tissues, including the brain and the skin. And that's why you may get a headache when dehydrated, and why your skin can look ragged and dry. A tall, cool glass of water or soda or iced tea will soothe your head and revive your skin, in most cases, doctors say — but only if you're dehydrated to start with.

"If you're a normally hydrated person, like you or me," says Dr. David Rish, a dermatologist in Beverly Hills, Calif., "then drinking **extra water is not going to do anything for your skin.** If your skin is dry, and you're hydrated, the best thing to do is apply lotion."

Perhaps **most cruelly of all, there's no good evidence that drinking water significantly curbs appetite.**

"I think that's mostly an **invention of the diet industry,**" says Carolyn Katzin, a nutritionist in Los Angeles who runs the American Cancer Society's nutrition program in California.

Analysis: It was delightful to read an article published in a popular media that was based on science. The bottom line: **Most of us get all the water we need from food. Drink if you are thirsty,** and *never "force-feed" yourself excess water.* The body's automatic thirst response kicks in before you physiologically require more water. I have seen *guessperts* claim that, when you are thirsty, it's too late. **Physiologically, nothing could be further from the truth!**

The admonition, "Drink lots of water" is promoted by the water industry and the nutrition industry in the hopes that your stomach will expand and you will feel full. This **fallacy results from neglecting the insulin response.** When overdosing on water, your body responds as though food has entered your stomach and secretes insulin to digest it. **Insulin makes you hungry.** That's why the "drinking lots of water" method *doesn't work* for appetite suppression or fulfillment – it is a very temporary effect.

Overdosing on water dilutes your blood, too. This causes a systemic imbalance and raises havoc with your body's automatic life-systems. Is your physician or nutritionist basing his recommendations on science or opinion? **If it's opinion, then I am delighted to bring you science so you will be in a position to make your own choices.**