

Water

The Essential Beverage for Health

Water is vital to human life – an essential macronutrient that is often overlooked. 60% of our bodies are water and every organ, tissue and cell in our bodies requires water to function. Without it, we would not survive for more than a few days.

Yet statistics show that many Europeans are not adequately hydrated^{1,2}, failing to drink enough water to meet European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) recommendations.³ By intervening to encourage increased water intake, we can have a positive impact on the health of millions of Europeans.

Hydration for Health



EFSA estimates that we consume around one fifth of the water we require through food and recommends we take on board an additional amount each day by drinking fluids – 2 litres for men and 1.6 litres women.

Optimal hydration is strongly linked to better long-term health outcomes⁴. Minimum intake levels are important because under-hydration is linked to negative health outcomes, in particular reduced kidney function,^{5,6} cardiovascular diseases⁷ and metabolic diseases⁸. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as kidney stones and type 2 diabetes are just some of the conditions connected to insufficient hydration. Under-hydration is also linked to decreased cognitive performance. Conversely, maintaining good hydration habits has been shown to improve memory, attention, and performance in education and the workplace⁹.

Water for Hydration

Maintaining adequate hydration helps to ensure optimum physical and mental health, but the method of hydration also has an impact. Water is the healthiest and most natural way to hydrate – it is free from sugar, calories and additives. Improved hydration and drinking habits can make a significant contribution to healthier lifestyles and may help counteract the obesity crisis that is currently challenging European health systems.

Populations at Heightened Risk

Certain groups are more vulnerable to insufficient hydration, and these groups are also subject to distinct vulnerabilities.

Children have a high water-to-weight ratio, immature water balance and thermoregulation, and an underdeveloped thirst mechanism¹⁰. But children can be reliant on others for access to water, particularly younger children. It has been estimated that approximately 60% of children do not drink



enough to meet EFSA recommendations and 25% drink less than one glass of water (250mL) each day. Optimal hydration is also crucial for a child's cognitive flexibility and memory¹¹. For a child's physical¹² and dental¹³ health and the prevention of overweight and obesity¹⁴, it is important not only that they are adequately hydrated, but that this is achieved primarily through healthy dietary choices like water and avoiding overconsumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.

In older adults, lack of proper hydration is associated with increased morbidity and mortality¹⁵ – an increasingly important fact given Europe's aging population. This group may also be dependent on others to provide them with adequate water, and they are particularly vulnerable to dehydration due to the physiological changes associated with ageing: decreased thirst sensation, declining kidney function, and lower body water content.



The Good News

Interventions to improve healthy hydration are both inexpensive and effective. Just a few glasses each day can make a huge difference to a person's health.

Education is key. Everyone should be empowered with the information they need to make healthy diet and lifestyle choices. Water needs to be included in policy instruments aimed at promoting healthy diets and fighting NCDs, particularly those targeted at vulnerable groups.

To be complete, a holistic approach to nutrition and health must include water and hydration.

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About this Factsheet

This factsheet is based on a review of scientific literature by Dr. Joan Gandy, a retired dietitian and Fellow of the British Dietetic Association. Dr. Gandy is editor of the Oxford Handbook of Nutrition and Dietetics and the Manual of Dietetic Practice. Extensive further references are available in support of the points made above.

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