



Dehydration in infants and children

Dehydration is a potentially life-threatening condition, especially in infants, children and the elderly.

Dehydration can occur when children are:

- sick (particularly with vomiting and diarrhoea)
- not drinking enough fluids regularly
- exercising or being active
- in hot or humid weather.

Water is essential for infants and children to:

- help regulate their body temperature through sweating
- keep their blood circulating
- help remove waste products and toxins through urine, sweat and faeces
- carry nutrients and oxygen to their body cells
- keep mucous membranes—eg in their lungs and mouth—moist
- aid their digestion
- lubricate and cushion their joints
- absorb shock—eg in their eyes and spinal cords.

What are the warning signs of dehydration?

In hot weather or if your child is ill, be alert for signs of:

- sleepiness or lethargy
- irritability or crying
- fewer wet nappies (or trips to the toilet)
- hot and dry skin

- a dry mouth and/or dry, cracked lips
- a body temperature around 40°C
- vomiting and/or diarrhoea
- a blue tinge to the skin as blood circulation slows
- a depressed fontanelle ('soft spot' on the top of the skull).

How can dehydration be avoided in hot weather?

The best way is to drink plenty of water throughout the day—not just at meal times. Older children should keep a bottle of water in the fridge and drink from it regularly, while bottle-fed babies might want extra water (boiled and cooled) after feeding. Do not dilute formula as this affects the nutrient content. As breastfed babies might want to feed more often, make sure you drink plenty of water as well. Other precautions you can take include:

- keeping children in the coolest part of the house with a fan (pointed away from baby running), or in the shade if they have to be outdoors
- dressing them in minimal clothing, natural fibres such as cotton, and a hat if outdoors
- applying and reapplying at least 15+ SPF sunscreen on all exposed parts of their bodies
- bathing them in tepid (room temperature) water—not cold water

- keeping air conditioned rooms at 24°–26°C
- limiting travel or, on long journeys, stopping frequently so children can drink or be breastfed
- using car air conditioners or partially opened windows
- offering cool treats—eg ice blocks or frozen oranges.

What is heat stroke and how can I avoid it?

Some signs of possible heat stroke are:

- rising body temperature
- headache and/or muscle cramps
- lethargy or 'floppiness'
- confusion, shortness of breath and vomiting
- increased thirst (followed by weakness and less desire to drink)
- urinating less, and dark coloured urine
- dry mouth and eyes
- unconsciousness (not rousing when touched or called).

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Heat stroke victims can suffer organ damage and even death, as too much water is lost from their bodies and their temperature rises. If you suspect dehydration, call 000 immediately. While you are waiting for help to arrive:

- remove excess clothing from the child
- cover with cool damp cloths
- continue to give fluids (see suitable fluids listed below) unless the child is unconscious.

During hot weather, aim to keep the house cool, even at night. Set air conditioners at 24°–26°C but check during the night to make sure the room isn't too cold. You can also help your baby/child sleep more comfortably by:

- letting them sleep in the coolest part of the house—eg passageways at night or the floor during the day—on cushions or in a portable cot rather than a pram
- keeping a fan running
- dressing them in as little clothing as possible
- hanging wet towels over chairs or windows to cool the air
- offering a cool drink before and after sleep time
- not leaving babies or young children asleep in car seats and never leaving them alone in cars.

What fluids are best?

Water is the best drink to ensure our bodies function properly, or oral rehydration solutions (also called 'clear fluids') if you suspect dehydration. These drinks are mainly water with a small amount of extra sugar and salts (never add salt as too much salt can be harmful). Suitable drinks include:

- solutions such as Gastrolyte®—ask your pharmacist for advice on which product is right for your baby
- cordial with extra water
- fruit juice with extra water
- flat soft drinks with extra water
- water with glucose or sugar added.

Use the following as a guide to diluting different kinds of drinks with water.

Drink & Quantity	Water	Comments
Cordial - 10ml	150ml	Do not use diet cordial.
Glucose (eg Glucodin®) - 2 tspns	240ml	
Sugar - 2 tspns	240ml	
Fruit juice - 50ml	150ml	Undiluted fruit juice can draw water into the gut causing further dehydration. Do not give fruit juice to babies under four months.
Flat soft drink - 50ml	150ml	Add warm water or stir until bubbles disappear.

Where can I learn more about dehydration?

Further information can be found at: www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=300&id=1845 – 'Gastroenteritis' fact sheet

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au – 'Child safety – hot weather' and 'Water – a vital nutrient'

www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=305&id=1605 – Health 'Babies in hot weather' fact sheet

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