

SENIOR FITNESS

The Importance of Proper Hydration

By

Jim Evans

DEAR JIM: I recently had a nasty “bug” including diarrhea and vomiting for several days. Although I seem to have survived the worst, I am finding that I am still very weak even two weeks later. I started exercising again – mostly just walking – but I’m experiencing cramps in my legs, and my mouth is dry all the time. I’ve had a constant headache during the past few days too and have felt lightheaded on occasion – especially when I am standing. I’m 71 and have always been in relatively good health. Should I stop exercising for a while and just wait until I feel back to normal? **DRY MOUTH IN DETROIT**

DEAR DRY MOUTH: You are probably experiencing mild dehydration based on the symptoms you describe, and I would recommend that you curtail any vigorous physical activity until you are fully rehydrated. Dehydration, of course, is the excessive loss of body fluids and important electrolytes, and diarrhea is a major cause of dehydration. Why is hydration so important?

Sixty to seventy percent of your body weight is water, so it is essential for life. Most people cannot survive without water for 4-5 days, and we are constantly losing water through respiration, urination, and perspiration, so it must be replaced to maintain the proper balance. Dehydration in older adults can become life threatening in as little as 24-48 hours and can seriously affect the kidneys and other internal organs, so it is not something to take lightly.

In most cases if you are feeling thirsty, you are already experiencing the onset of dehydration, but the easiest way for most people to verify if you are dehydrated is the color of your urine. If it is dark yellow – instead of the normal clear or pale yellow – your body needs fluids. While gradually increasing your water consumption will usually rehydrate you in most cases, sometimes fluid replacement may require the addition of electrolytes– particularly sodium – to bring things back into proper balance. You should probably make an early appointment with your physician to be sure that you have not depleted your electrolyte levels to a dangerous level.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends a daily consumption of 9-13 cups of water to maintain adequate hydration. It will be easier – and your

hydration will be more quickly restored – if the water is room temperature simply because you can drink more of it at one time than if it is cold or iced. Of course, much of your daily water requirement can be satisfied by certain foods – particularly fruits and leafy vegetables – so you don't necessarily have to drink your way to proper hydration.

Wait a few days until you are feeling more fully recovered before resuming your exercise and getting back into your normal routine – and take a bottle of water along with you while you walk.

Jim Evans is a 40-year veteran of the health and fitness industry and a nationally recognized consultant on fitness for seniors.