

Backcountry Health

avoid dehydration



Water makes up two-thirds of our body weight, but we lose about 2.5 liters of water every day by means of sweat, respiration and urination. During vigorous physical activity, especially on a hot day, it's possible to lose twice this amount! When a person loses more fluids than he takes in, the result is dehydration.

Mild dehydration (1-2% loss of body weight in fluids) can cause excessive thirst, fatigue, dry mouth, decreased urine output, muscle weakness, cramping, headache and dizziness. These symptoms are easily treated by increasing fluid intake. However, severe dehydration (9-15% loss of body weight in fluids) is a life-threatening medical emergency. This stage will cause extreme thirst; irritability and confusion; very dry mouth; skin and mucous membranes, lack of sweating; dark urine in small amounts or none at all; sunken eyes; poor skin elasticity; low blood pressure; rapid heartbeat; fever; delirium or unconsciousness; and serious electrolyte imbalances.

At greater risk of dehydration are infants, children, the elderly, and individuals with acute illnesses, especially when fever or diarrhea is present. Be aware that taking certain medications, such as antihistamines, diuretics or blood pressure medicines also puts you at greater risk.

The best way to avoid dehydration is to replace lost body fluids frequently by drinking plenty of water (avoiding caffeinated drinks). When traveling, hiking or camping, know ahead of time if you will have access to potable water, then as you enjoy outdoor activities in any season, remember to drink up! 🏕️

—Sharon Lee Maloney, R.N.