

Hydration - Why, Who, What, When, How Much, and How

Hydration is essential for health and wellbeing. The risk of dehydration is highest at this time of year with the constantly changing temperatures - one day is 18C and raining with very low hydration needs and the next day is 30C and humid with tripled hydration needs. This makes it very important to remain aware of the temperature forecast for cycling days and to consciously plan on a hydration strategy. The advantage of aging is the ability to take advantage of experience and cycle smarter!

Why

If you are underhydrated, at the least, you'll experience increased tiredness, impaired concentration which can result in poorer bike skills and judgement, and impaired sense of proportion and sense of humour.

In other words, the hills will start to seem too big, the ride too long, and your companions too irritating! You are also much more likely to fall off your bike because of judgement errors.

If you start to feel this way, you need to drink more. If your companions start to seem very irritable you should (tactfully!) suggest they drink more. (Also, drink more yourself because possibly they are irritated by you, because you are dehydrated...)

Being underhydrated also results in headaches and cramping. If you commonly suffer from cramps on riding days then the answer is not cramp remedies and seeing a physio, but simply to drink significantly more while riding!

More serious consequences of being regularly dehydrated include the formation of kidney and bladder stones, which cause severe pain when they are passed. If they are not passed they can cause kidney infections, kidney and bladder cancer, and ultimately kidney failure. In other words, kidney and bladder stones have serious consequences, but are easily avoided by drinking enough water!

Who

If you are doing sustained exercise (lasting longer than an hour), you should pay attention to hydration during your exercise. If you're exercising for less than an hour, you can adequately hydrate by having a drink after you finish exercising.

People under the age of 30 years who have free access to water do not need to consciously concentrate on adequate hydration, because they have a strong thirst mechanism that causes them to develop a raging thirst that ensures they drink enough. This thirst mechanism becomes less effective with age and after the age of 40 years becomes unreliable. Thirst awareness can disappear after the age of 60 years.

This problem is compounded by your stomach emptying more slowly as you age, so not only do you feel less thirsty, but you may have a feeling of uncomfortable fullness or bloating after the first few mouthfuls of liquid. This can then discourage older people from drinking enough to stay hydrated, unless they are able to have frequent small drinks.

What

The best hydration fluid is water. It's free, easily available and, unlike sports drinks, doesn't ferment in your bottle in hot weather if not immediately rinsed out after a long ride.

The worst hydration fluid is coffee, whether brewed, espresso or filtered. Coffee is a diuretic and counts as a negative amount when adding up your fluid intake.

The second best hydration fluid is whatever flavour of non-caffeinated fluid you like and will drink. If you eat real food, i.e. breakfast, morning tea and lunch, you do not need the electrolytes in sports drinks. If you subsist only on bananas, jelly snakes and energy gels then you probably do need the electrolytes in sports drinks.

Personally, I prefer to get my electrolytes in an almond croissant and English Breakfast tea at morning tea, cheese, crackers, tea and fruit at lunch, and then have jelly snakes and salted nuts in my jersey pocket for really long rides. But if you prefer sports drinks, then drink sports drinks!

If you are cycling in temperatures above 35C and drinking more than 1L water every hour, then you should eat salty snacks every so often, such as nuts, Vegemite sangers, BBQ shapes. Otherwise, you should consider adding electrolyte powders to every third bottle of water.

How Much

A good rule of thumb for hydration when cycling is:

Forecast maximum Temperature during ride	Hourly fluid intake
<20C	300ml/hour
<25C	500ml/hour
<30C	750ml/hour
<35C	1000ml/hour
>35C	1250ml/hour Consider taking a break during the hottest part of the day or shortening the ride

This is an approximate guide. If you tend to be a heavy sweater (pause here for joke about crossing Sumo wrestlers and sheep!), it is very humid, or you are doing 1000m of climbing, then you may need to increase your hourly intake by 250ml/hour.

A good way to check whether you need to adjust the your intake is to weigh yourself immediately before and after the ride. Any weight loss is dehydration - you should drink this weight in fluids ASAP. Next time you ride in similar conditions, increase your fluid intake to counter this weight loss.

How

If you look at the recommended fluid amounts and think about how much you can comfortably drink rapidly (usually 100-150ml), it becomes clear that on any ride longer than 2 hours in temperature above 20C, drinking while riding is essential, unless you are happy to stop for a drink every 10 minutes!

Traditionally, cyclists have drink bottle holders on their down tubes, seat tubes, or both. This can be challenging to reach as backs, necks and hips become stiffer, or if you have never acquired this skill. Alternatives to traditionally placed bottle holders include holders on handle bars and holders at the back of the seat.

Drinking while riding one handed can also be challenging as balance becomes more difficult with age, on rough terrain, in heavy traffic or in close group riding. An easy solution is a hydration back pack. The mouth piece can be easily inserted in the mouth with minimal one handed riding required and no need to bend and reach for a bottle. The contents stay colder than in a bottle and the mouth piece does not get contaminated by road dirt (or horse manure if riding on the Warburton Trail).

Summary

So in summary, adequate hydration is crucial for happy, safe and enjoyable cycling. As we age, adequate hydration requires forethought and planning.

Follow these steps to ensure you hydrate properly:

1. Check the forecast maximum temperature during your ride.
2. Work out how much you will need to drink during the ride.
3. Make certain you are able to drink the required amount by having appropriately placed water bottles or hydration pack
4. Make certain you drink the planned amount!