

# Ten Critical Dehydration Signs & Prevention Tips



We've all said we feel dehydrated at one time or another, but what does it mean to be dehydrated? Dehydration occurs when your body loses more fluids than it takes in. This results in an imbalance in electrolytes and bodily functions.

Studies show that more than 75% of Americans suffer from chronic dehydration. If left untreated, dehydration can lead to significant health problems, particularly for children or older adults.

Monitoring dehydration symptoms is key for proper treatment and can help prevent more serious, life-threatening conditions. If dehydration becomes more severe, it can lead to mental and physical decline that needs immediate medical action.

## 1. Not urinating or very dark urine

An easy way to test and see if you're dehydrated is by checking the color of your urine. Normal urine should be pale yellow, like lightly colored lemonade. If your urine is a darker color, similar to apple juice, this could be a sign of moderate to severe dehydration.

If you're not urinating or don't feel the need to go to the bathroom for many hours, you're most likely severely dehydrated. This requires immediate medical attention.

What to do: If you find your urine is dark yellow, start drinking more water immediately. It's best to take frequent small sips of water that your body can adequately absorb rather than trying to chug all the water you're missing in one sitting.

If you feel you're not getting enough fluids regularly, consider taking a large water bottle to drink throughout the day — at work, in the car, and on the go. It might be helpful to set an alarm to remind you to have a drink at various intervals of your day.

## 2. Dry skin that doesn't bounce back when pinched

Lack of skin elasticity is another sign of dehydration.

Try this test: Pinch the skin on the top of your hand and see what happens. If it moves back slowly, this is an indication that you're moderately dehydrated. If the skin seems to stick together (i.e., it "tents"), this is a sign of severe dehydration.

What to do: Just like with darker urine, you should increase your water intake and drink fluids if you're experiencing mild to moderate dehydration. A glass of water is typically a good "go-to."

If you are severely dehydrated and your skin tents, it's a good idea to visit an urgent care provider who can help treat dehydration.

### **3. Rapid heartbeat and breathing**

It's natural to have an increased heart rate and rapid breathing while exercising. But if your symptoms don't go away once you've cooled down, or if you haven't been working out, it could be a sign of severe dehydration. That's because depleted blood volume can affect your heart's ability to pump blood.

What to do: If you are experiencing these symptoms, you should visit an urgent care provider to assess dehydration. You may need IV hydration to reverse severe dehydration that is impacting your breathing and causing other problems. IV hydration provides fluids and has electrolytes like sodium chloride and potassium to aid in quick rehydration.

### **4. Dizziness or lightheadedness**

Did you know that your brain is approximately 75% water? That's why drinking water and eating water-filled foods can help support your brain's health and function.

On the flip side, not getting enough fluids can negatively affect your brain function. For example, if you are experiencing dizziness or lightheadedness or feel like you may pass out, this may mean you are severely dehydrated.

What to do: Don't take symptoms like these lightly. Properly rehydrate by slowly drinking water or an electrolyte replacement beverage if available. If you're experiencing dizziness or lightheadedness, you should go to the emergency room as soon as possible to be checked out by a healthcare provider.

Beverages aren't the only way to boost your fluid intake. Fruits and vegetables are also naturally high in water content and count toward your daily fluid needs. Examples include cucumbers, watermelons, tomatoes, strawberries, apples, and grapes. Eat them on their own or add them to smoothies or homemade popsicles.

### **5. Unconsciousness**

Unconsciousness from dehydration can result from low blood pressure or dizziness. When accompanied by other dehydration signs, this could indicate a severe fluid loss.

What to do: Call 911 immediately if you're around someone who passes out or you're alone and feel like you may pass out. This requires transportation to the emergency room right away for dehydration treatment.

Like with other severe signs of dehydration, you or the person affected will most likely receive rehydration therapy.

## **6. Fatigue**

Another classic sign of dehydration is fatigue. Studies have shown that those who sleep less tend to be more dehydrated, and those who are well-hydrated sleep longer on average.

**What to do:** If you feel frequently tired shortly in your workouts or regularly fatigued, it's likely a good time to evaluate your water intake. Call your healthcare provider or local urgent care if you experience extreme fatigue that affects your everyday life.

## **7. Headaches**

A common symptom of dehydration is headaches. These can be caused by reduced blood volume and insufficient oxygen reaching your brain. When your body doesn't have the right amount of fluid, your blood vessels may narrow, affecting circulation and increasing the likelihood of headaches.

When you experience electrolyte imbalances from dehydration, this can also contribute to headache symptoms.

**What to do:** If you're getting more headaches than usual, consider how much water you've been drinking. It's possible that you're not supplying your body with enough fluid, resulting in headaches.

## **8. Muscle cramps**

When your electrolytes are off-balance because of dehydration, you're more likely to experience muscle cramps. Electrolytes like sodium, potassium, and magnesium are essential for muscle function.

**What to do:** If you're experiencing muscle cramps, consider whether you're drinking enough fluids regularly — especially during and after a workout. Electrolytes can become imbalanced when fluids are lost through sweating or inadequate intake. Rehydrate with electrolyte-rich foods or beverages and stretch your muscles to help alleviate cramping. If the muscle cramps do not improve, seek medical attention as severe dehydration can damage muscle tissue if not treated appropriately.

## **9. Sunken eyes or dry eyes**

While perhaps not as obvious, having dry or sunken eyes is a classic symptom of dehydration. That's because less fluid and tears are circulating, leading to eye dryness.

In these cases, your eyes can burn. It may even feel like you have sand in your eyes, or they may become more sensitive to light.

What to do: If any of these symptoms occur, drinking water may help.

## 10. White tongue

Dehydration can also cause a physical symptom called the white tongue. This appears as a white coating on the tongue's surface caused by debris, bacteria, and dead cells that become lodged and inflamed. This can occur for many reasons, but the primary causes are dehydration and dry mouth.

What to do: While a white tongue is generally harmless, it can be an underlying sign that you're dehydrated. Drink plenty of water and brush your tongue gently with a toothbrush. If it doesn't go away in a few weeks, call a healthcare provider.

## Causes of dehydration

There are several possible causes of dehydration, typically either due to not drinking enough water or from losing bodily fluids:

- **Inadequate fluid intake:** If you're not drinking enough water or water-containing foods like fruits and vegetables, it's easier to become dehydrated.
- **Diarrhea and vomiting:** These symptoms cause fluid loss, which can result in dehydration.
- **Excessive sweating:** This can result from strenuous or endurance physical activity or exposure to hot weather conditions.
- **Increased urination:** This can occur if you have diabetes or certain medications that can cause you to urinate more and lose fluid, such as diuretics or blood pressure medications. Also, be mindful that coffee/caffeine and alcohol can increase urination.
- **Fever:** Having a fever alone dehydrates you. That's because an increase in body temperature increases your metabolism and breathing rate, leading you to breathe out more moisture. Fever can cause dehydration, especially in kids, due to increased insensible water losses. However, dehydration doesn't cause fever.
- **Hot weather:** Overheating due to hot temperatures can also cause dehydration.

## How to prevent dehydration

These tips can help you prevent dehydration, which is easier than treating it after it has already happened.

- Keep a water bottle by your side and in your line of sight.
- Add natural ingredients to your water, like fresh strawberries, cucumbers, and orange or lemon slices. The flavor may encourage you to drink more water.
- Eat more water-filled fruit and vegetables. In fact, cantaloupe, watermelon, leafy greens, and tomatoes all contain 90% water.
- Drink electrolyte-replacement beverages or coconut water after a workout.
- Avoid alcohol if you're already feeling dehydrated, as this increases your fluid loss.

## FAQs about dehydration

Here are some common questions about dehydration.

### Does dehydration cause high blood pressure?

Yes, dehydration can cause your blood pressure to fluctuate, leading to blood pressure that is too high or too low.

### What happens if you drink too much water?

Drinking too much water can dilute essential electrolytes, swelling the body's cells and disrupting brain function. Common signs of too much water can be nausea, vomiting, confusion, and disorientation. The kidneys are designed to urinate out the excess, so unless someone is purposefully drinking excessively, this isn't a practical concern.

### What is the fastest way to cure dehydration?

The fastest way to cure dehydration is to drink fluids, particularly those that contain electrolytes, such as sports drinks or oral rehydration solutions. People unable to drink properly due to medical conditions may require IV hydration for faster results. If you're experiencing severe symptoms, head to urgent care rather than treating dehydration at home.

### What does a dehydration headache feel like?

Pain from a dehydration headache can vary. With mild dehydration, it can feel like dull throbbing but can be sharp or pounding as dehydration worsens.

### Can dehydration cause a fever?

Symptoms of dehydration don't typically include dehydration fever. When you get a fever, this is an immune system response to an underlying condition like an infection. However, severe dehydration can lead to complications like heatstroke, which may raise your body temperature in a way that feels like a fever.

### **Visit an urgent care for dehydration symptoms**

When you're severely dehydrated, your gut reaction might be to chug fluids or water-filled foods into the body as quickly as possible. However, you don't want to overdo it.

It's possible to drink too much water, resulting in a condition called hyponatremia. This is when sodium and electrolytes in the blood are so low that they can be life-threatening. This is challenging and usually causes kidney or other medical problems.

Dehydration can be dangerous if left untreated, particularly for children or older adults. Understanding your fluid needs based on age, medical status, and lifestyle can help balance your hydration.