



# Sports Drinks: Are They Necessary for My Child?

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## Introduction

Sports drinks were developed to help replenish fluid, electrolytes, and carbohydrates lost during long, hard exercise, sometimes performed in extreme temperatures. For example, participating in endurance cycling, marathon training, competitive soccer and tennis matches, and football during the summer months. While sports drinks provide benefits under such circumstances, youth are consuming sports drinks after minimal physical activity, during routine sports practices, and sometimes even outside of sports participation.

*“Promote water, not sports or energy drinks, as the principal source of hydration for children and adolescents.”*

— American Academy of Pediatrics (2011, 1188)

## Sports Drinks = Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

Sports drinks contain anywhere from 3 to 5 teaspoons of sugar per 8 ounces (or up to about 8 teaspoons per 12-ounce bottle) and are considered sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) due to their limited nutritional benefit. Some research shows that a child or adolescent who drinks SSB may not get essential nutrients for growth, development, and proper digestion. Therefore, when a youth chooses to drink an SSB, it may be in place of a more nutritious drink such as low-fat or fat-free milk. Additionally, the calories from sports drinks, like all other SSB, add up; if not used, weight gain is inevitable.



The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children consume water before, during, and after exercise. If the activity is intense, lasts longer than an hour, and is performed in hot, humid conditions, a sports drink may be appropriate. If a child participates in normal activity for less than three hours, the American Academy of Pediatrics (2011) suggests that water be the beverage of choice.

## Tips for Making Sure Your Child is Well-Hydrated

So what can you do to make sure your child is not getting too many calories from sports drinks and is drinking enough water?

- Encourage kids to stop and take a few gulps of water when passing a water fountain.

- See how many gulps a child takes to drink 4 ounces of water. This will establish a reference point for how much water a child drinks.
- Put lemon, orange, lime, pineapple, or strawberry slices in a water pitcher at home or in water bottles for sports practice (you can also freeze such fruits and add them to the water).
- Have children carry a water bottle to school and/or sports practice.
- Make it a family affair to increase water consumption by getting all family members their own water bottles.\*
- Track how much water you and your children drink per day by placing a chart in an area where everyone will see it. Make it fun by rewarding “champion drinkers” with a new piece of sports equipment or extra time to play outside.
- If children have phones, have them set up reminders or calendar appointments reminding them to drink water at certain times throughout the day.

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\*Be sure to clean the water bottles daily to prevent any bacteria or microorganisms from growing. Also, if you are worried about BPA levels (bisphenol A, an industrial chemical used to make some plastic bottles), many brands, such as Rubbermaid and Nalgene, provide BPA-free bottles.

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## How Much Is Enough?

During exercise, your child can lose weight from water loss. Knowing this can be helpful in making sure they avoid dehydration and its nasty effects like fatigue, moodiness, and poor concentration. However, you do not want your child to drink too much either, because that can create dangerous health problems.

Depending on your child’s body size and other factors like diet, health conditions, and medication use, the amount of water a person needs can change. Activity can increase how much water your child needs, too. In hot, humid conditions or when performing intense exercise for an extended time, an increase in water intake can help offset dehydration and heat illness. Remember that if your child is engaging in strenuous activity for long periods of time, a sports drink may be beneficial — especially for athletes restricting their food intake.

How can you tell if your child is getting enough water? A quick and easy way is to teach them how to monitor their urine color. If urine looks more like apple juice, your child may be dehydrated; a straw or pale yellow color indicates good hydration. Caution must be exercised when using this method because some medications and foods can affect urine color.

For school-age children participating in activities, the following guidelines may be helpful to assure adequate hydration.

## Water Intake Before Activity

- Drink 16 ounces approximately two hours before activity.
- Drink 8 to 16 ounces about 15 to 30 minutes before activity.

## During Activity\*

Drink at least 4 ounces every 15 minutes during an activity. The amount will vary depending on your child, the activity, and other factors.

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\*The amount of water your child needs depends on activity level, the amount they sweat, the environment where the exercise is taking place, and their body size. These values are not necessarily iron clad but are more of a guide. Your child may need more or less.

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## After Activity

- Drink 24 ounces for every pound of body weight lost over two hours.

## Summary

The key points to remember are:

- Normal physical activity does not necessarily require the use of sports drinks.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics (2011) does not endorse the use of sports drinks by children or adolescents unless the athlete is participating in intense, prolonged exercise in extreme environmental conditions.
- Getting enough — but not too much — water is important for children.

If you have any additional questions, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension family and consumer sciences agent. A list of local offices and their contact information can be found at [www.ext.vt.edu/offices](http://www.ext.vt.edu/offices).

## Resources

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