

The Facts About... Hydration For Vulnerable Elderly People

Why is dehydration a danger to elderly people?

One of the main dangers as we age is that the thirst mechanism just doesn't kick in when it should. Elderly people, especially those with dementia, can easily become dehydrated and in turn become even more confused. This Fact Sheet has been produced for nurses, carers and others involved in the welfare of elderly people – especially vulnerable older people in nursing homes or hospitals - as a reminder about the need for proper hydration at all times.

Being dehydrated is not just uncomfortable: it can be damaging to health. This is especially true for those taking medication for other medical conditions. As well as adding to confusion, dehydration can affect kidney function and be harmful to the liver, joints and muscles. It can also cause cholesterol problems, headaches, reduced blood pressure (hypotension), fatigue and constipation.

What are the benefits of hydration for elderly people?

For older people in care, being well hydrated means:

- Fewer UTIs (urinary tract infections);
- Reduced cost of care;
- Reduced NHS costs;
- Better kidney health;
- Less danger of dizziness and falls;
- Greater concentration and cognitive ability;
- Reduced incidence of constipation.

Do those in my care have to drink water specifically?

Research about bottled water shows that as we age, we drink less water. Drinking water is a healthy option, although of course fluids from other sources also count. Tea, milky beverages, other cold drinks or foods such as soup and salad that have a high water content all make a useful contribution to hydration. The key thing is fluid intake of whatever kind but for elderly people trying to avoid intake of excess sugar due to diabetes, drinking water is a good habit. It is essential to make drinking water accessible. This means not just placing the water nearby but encouraging, or actively helping, people to drink.

What's the best way to encourage water intake?

- Having water that is conveniently dispensed and tastes good helps to entice elderly people to hydrate. A water cooler helps residents and staff stay hydrated safely and hygienically.
- A cooler with disposable cups avoids washing jugs and glasses.
- Remember, older people often need to sip fluid slowly throughout the day as drinking an entire 250ml glass in one go can be challenging.
- Many elderly people get dehydrated at night because they avoid drinking to avoid loo visits. In fact, hydration will reduce the urge to pass water.

And **most importantly**, it is vital to ensure that staff or family help the person to drink.

How can I tell if my patients are dehydrated?

Common signs of dehydration are:

- Decreased ability to carry out physical tasks, loss of appetite, reduction in urinary output, sleepiness, headaches, impatience and lack of concentration as well as more serious symptoms in the case of severe dehydration;
- Skin that is severely dehydrated has less elasticity than normal can be a sign of dehydration;
- Not passing urine;
- Urine being dark in colour: healthy, hydrated urine is pale lemon or straw coloured;
- Urine that has an odour.

What kind of water cooler do we need?

Whether you choose a bottled water cooler or a mains-fed water cooler for your care home or hospital depends on practical considerations. Where there is no convenient access to potable mains water, bottled water coolers are the perfect choice. If you have a suitable location for a mains-fed unit, but limited storage space for bottles, then a plumbed-in unit may be better suited. The key thing is to choose a reputable supplier. BWCA members are accredited and rigorously audited. To ensure you find an accredited water distributor, check <http://www.bwca.org.uk/find-a-member.php>

About this Fact Sheet

This Fact Sheet has been produced by the British Water Cooler Association (BWCA), the most respected trade body representing companies supplying bottled water and mains-fed coolers for over 20 years. BWCA Members are under an obligation to adhere to strict Codes of Practice and best practice and are audited for compliance annually by 3rd party inspection organisations.

BWCA is a member of the **Parliamentary Forum on Hydration** which concerns itself with improving hydration amongst elderly people.