

Sport Drinks: Myths and Facts



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Hydration is a critical component of sports nutrition, yet often does not get the attention it deserves. After all, any fluid will do during sports and exercise, right? No, not according to the science. Scientific research continues to uncover additional reasons to rethink fluid recommendations. Get up to speed with these facts:

Myth: Water is the best fluid replacement during activity.

Fact: While water is good, it has its limitations.

- Water doesn't have flavour to encourage drinking.¹
- Water turns off thirst before complete rehydration takes place.²
- Water lacks electrolytes and carbohydrate energy that athletes need to perform at their best.³

Myth: Sports drinks are all the same.

Fact: The formula matters a lot. Research shows that:

- Too high of a carbohydrate level slows fluid absorption.⁴
- A blend of simple carbohydrates (i.e., sucrose, glucose and fructose), at an overall concentration that's not too high, can help speed fluid absorption.⁵
- Sodium content is important. Having enough sodium in the beverage will keep the thirst mechanism active for better drinking and will result in a more complete rehydration.⁶
- Taste and flavour matter. If they're not suitable for the exercise occasion you won't consume enough to maintain proper hydration.⁷

Myth: Sports drink consumption during exercise contributes to weight gain.

Fact: According to research, exercisers who drink sports drinks during activity can work out longer and harder^{3,8} and are less likely to overeat following a workout.⁹ Research also shows that consuming carbohydrate during exercise makes activity feel easier.¹⁰ These are all positive benefits for those exercising to manage weight.

Myth: Sports drinks are high in sugar and calories.

Fact: Ounce for ounce, sports drinks have about half the calories and sugar of fruit juice or regular soft drinks. For example, Gatorade has only 50 calories and 14 grams carbohydrate per 8-oz serving versus fruit juice or regular pop, which have 100 to 110 calories and 27 grams of carbohydrate per 8 oz serving.

Myth: Sports drink consumption triggers an exaggerated insulin response during exercise.

Fact: Actually, there is a modest insulin response to sports drink consumption at rest or during exercise. Insulin release is a natural response to ingestion of carbohydrate-containing foods or beverages. High doses of simple carbohydrates (sugar) evoke the greatest insulin response. Comparatively speaking, sports drinks have a low carbohydrate content and are often consumed during exercise, which blunts the insulin response. A slight rise in insulin following ingestion of a sports drink during exercise helps to increase the rate of glucose uptake and use by working muscles - a desirable effect to help boost performance.^{11,12}

Myth: Sports drinks are only for events lasting more than 60 minutes.

Fact: Sports drinks provide benefits over water during vigorous exercise, even during bouts lasting less than 60 minutes. Research demonstrates that sports drinks help performance in endurance competitions as well as shorter-term events or stop-and-go sports, like football, basketball, soccer, tennis and hockey.^{8,13}

Myth: Sports drinks have too much salt.

Fact: Sodium is an important ingredient, but it doesn't take a lot to make a sports drink work. For example, Gatorade contains enough sodium (110mg/8oz) for you to rehydrate, yet it is classified as a low-sodium beverage by the FDA. To put it in perspective, Gatorade has less sodium than an equivalent serving of milk or a slice of bread. Sodium is used in a sports drink because it activates thirst helping to ensure you drink until fully rehydrated.

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