Increasing fluid intake in the elderly

Why are the elderly more at risk of dehydration?

Dehydration is a significant issue amongst the elderly population including those in residential aged care. Dehydration is under diagnosed and can often go unnoticed. The elderly tend to be more at risk of dehydration for a number of reasons, including:

- Diminishing sense of thirst with age
- Regular use of some medications
- Diminished ability to see and identify fluids
- Dependence on others to provide fluids
- Limited mobility and physical difficulties including reduced ability to reach for fluids and frequent spillages
- Dementia and forgetting to drink
- Oral and swallowing problems and the need for thickened fluids
- Incontinence and the desire to drink less to reduce frequency of need to pass urine or bowel motions
- Diminished ability to overcome the effects of vomiting, diarrhoea or fever
- Chronic illness
- Increased loss of fluid through dribbling
- More rapid breathing with respiratory infections resulting in increased fluid loss
- Being in rooms that are overly heated
- Limited range of fluids available that do not match a person’s food and fluid preferences

Consequences of dehydration:

- Headaches, drowsiness and mental confusion
- Lack of saliva (this may increase the risk of malnutrition)
- Decreased ability to regulate body temperature
- Dry, and itchy skin (poor skin elasticity)
- Decrease in kidney function
- Loss of muscle tone
- Constipation
- Postural hypotension
- Decreased reaction time
- Strong smelling, dark urine
- Dizziness and increased risk of falls
- Dry mouth, lips and tongue
- Delayed wound healing

Common signs of dehydration:

- Strong smelling, dark urine
- Constipation
- Dry mouth, lips & tongue
- No pool of saliva under the tongue
- Confusion and irritability
- Poor skin elasticity
- Hollow sunken eyes

Every system in the human body requires water to function properly. Having enough fluid helps to maintain body temperature, transport nutrients around the body and promote the removal of waste products. Depending on lean body mass, water accounts for 50-80% of body weight. Dehydration occurs when a person loses more water from their body than is supplied. As a consequence their body cannot carry out its normal functions as effectively.
Encouraging Fluid Intake:
It’s important to identify those at risk of dehydration and encourage and support fluid intake. The following tips may be useful in encouraging people to increase their fluid intake:

- **Have fluid within reach** day and night
- **Offer small amounts of fluid more often**, rather than larger amounts less often
- **Be aware of feeding difficulties and provide fluids appropriately**, e.g. with a straw, in a special cup, or a squeeze bottle. Soup may be better offered in a mug for residents who find using a spoon difficult
- **Encourage family and friends to drink fluids socially** with the resident
- **Provide fluids that residents prefer**, e.g. if a resident doesn’t like water, offer alternatives like weak cordial or flavour water with lemon slices, berries or mint
- **Have fluids available** during activity and therapy sessions
- **Offer a wide range of beverages**, especially for those on thickened fluids
- **Remember those requiring thickened fluids** are at high risk of dehydration, be patient and persistent in **encouraging fluid intake**

**Check fluid intakes** – do not assume residents are consuming adequate fluid

**Provide extra fluids between meals** according to a set fluid schedule — e.g. three times a day or every 1.5 hours. In Aged Care Facilities, you may want to assign a staff member to carry out the “hydration round”

**Encourage additional fluid intake during existing procedures and activities**, e.g.:
  - With medications
  - After a resident returns from the toilet,
  - Put signs in bathrooms to remind staff of this procedure
  - Before and after physiotherapy sessions

**Offer high fluid foods** e.g. fruit (whole or pureed), soup, jelly, custard, yoghurt, ice-cream, ice blocks (especially popular in hot weather), and ice chips

**Be direct when offering fluids**
e.g. instead of asking “Do you want to have a drink?” which allows a choice not to drink, it may be better to say “I would like you to have a drink of water with me” or “let’s have a drink of water together.”

**Display reminders** (i.e. picture of water drop) in kitchens, care plans, near residents’ beds

**How much fluid?**
Fluid requirements vary significantly between individuals.

**The minimum recommended fluid intake for the elderly** is 1500ml of fluid daily. Many will require more than this.

It may be interesting to do a fluid audit to check how much fluid the residents in your facility are consuming!

**Check out our other fact sheets:**
- Dietary Fibre and Bowel Health
- Constipation and Diarrhoea

*Please Note: recommendations are general in nature and may not be appropriate for residents experiencing dysphasia. Please modify recommendations in line with individual’s texture modification requirements or consult with your facility’s Dietitian/Speech pathologist.*