

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“The Eight Glasses of Water a Day Myth”

With the warmer weather and longer days, we are reminded to “stay hydrated” and drink eight glasses of water – or about two liters – a day. But is this based on science or is it a myth? Healthy people can actually die from drinking too much water. However, since water and sodium balance are essential to life, it is extremely rare for people to die from drinking too much – or too little – fluid. In most cases, your body’s finely tuned molecular processes are unconsciously taking care of you. Sports and friendly competition try to ensure that we drink compulsory amounts of water throughout the day. “Gallon Challenges” support the widely held belief that water consumption beyond physiological need or thirst is healthy. But this is not so. Individual body water needs – intake – are primarily based upon how much water people lose. How much water each person needs to drink mainly depends on three factors: 1) Body Weight. The bigger you are the more water you need. 2) Environmental Temperature. The hotter it is the more you sweat and lose water. And 3) Physical Activity Levels. Exercise increases water loss. Consequently, a “one size fits all” fluid replacement strategy, such as drinking eight glasses of eight ounces of water per day, is inappropriate for everyone. It is not known where the eight glasses a day myth came from. Perhaps, this two-liter intake threshold is derived from a misinterpretation of original recommendations offered by the U.S. Food and Nutrition Board in 1945 as well as the 2017 European Food Safety Authority, which states the daily recommended amount of water includes all beverages plus the moisture contained in foods. The moisture contained in foods, especially fresh fruits, sodas, juices, soups, milk, coffee and even beer, contributes to this daily recommended water requirement. Alcohol has diuretic properties and ethanol acts directly on the kidneys to make us pee more – caffeinated beverages, like tea and coffee, do not increase urinary water losses above the amount of water contained in these beverages. Total body water balance, or what exercise scientists call homeostasis, is complicated and when it comes to hydration, our kidneys are the king. The kidneys will make molecular adjustments to both underhydration and overhydration within 40 seconds in response to any upset in the water balance. Studies suggest that drinking about two liters of water per day reduces kidney stone formation in people with a history of kidney stones and decreases the number of bladder infections in people with a history of bladder infections. Some studies report better cognitive performance after increasing water intake.

In the America I love, drinking extra water will probably not offer superior health benefits but probably is not harmful either.

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