Dehydration, Elderly

Dehydration is the loss of water and important blood salts like potassium (K+) and sodium (Na+) from the body. Vital organs like the kidneys, brain, and heart cannot function without a proper amount of water and salt. Any loss of fluids from the body can cause dehydration. Some warning signs of dehydration are listed below.

MILD DEHYDRATION

- Thirst. You may not be able to tell when you are thirsty.
- Dry lips.
- Slightly dry mouth membranes.

MODERATE DEHYDRATION

- Very dry mouth membranes.
- Sunken eyes.
- Skin does not bounce back quickly when lightly pinched and released.
- Decreased urine production.

SEVERE DEHYDRATION

- Rapid, weak pulse (more than 100 at rest).
- Cold hands and feet.
- Loss of ability to sweat in spite of heat and temperature.
- Rapid breathing.
- Blue lips.
- Confusion, sleepy and difficult to awaken (*lethargy*) or difficult to arouse.
- Significantly decreased urine production or no urine output for 8 hours.

TREATMENT

Contact your caregiver for both **mild dehydration** and **moderate dehydration**. If you are **severely dehydrated**, go to a hospital for treatment. Intravenous fluids (IV's) will quickly reverse dehydration and are often life-saving in older persons.

CAUSE

To treat dehydration, you must first find and treat the cause. Lack of fluid intake is a common cause of dehydration. This is because as we grow older, we are often not as thirsty as we should be.

Correction of fluid lack by mouth is safe and restores the fluids and salts in your blood quickly. ORS (oral replacement solutions) are made which allow your intestines to absorb maximum amounts of water along with small amounts of salts. ORS are not the same as sports drinks designed for concentrated energy and salt replacement in healthy, high-performance athletes. Sports drinks can make dehydration worse. ORS are available from your local grocery store. Your pharmacist can guide you with these. Drinking plain water may be harmful. Water does not contain salts and minerals (*electrolytes*).

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS FOR DEHYDRATION

- In general, eat normally while drinking more fluids than usual. Drink small amounts of fluids frequently and increase as tolerated. Drink enough fluids to keep urine clear or pale yellow. Broths, weak decaffeinated tea, lemon lime soft drinks (allowed to go flat) and ORS replace fluids and electrolytes.

Avoid:

- Carbonated drinks.
- Juice.
- Extremely hot or cold fluids.
- Caffeine drinks.
- Fatty, greasy foods.
- Alcohol.
- Tobacco.
- Too much intake of anything at one time.
- Gelatin desserts.

- *Probiotics* are active cultures of beneficial bacteria. They may lessen the amount and number of diarrheal stools. Probiotics can be found in yogurt with active cultures and in supplements.
- **Wash hands well to avoid spreading germs (*bacteria*) and virus.**
- Checking your weight 2 times per day will help decide if fluid replacement is adequate. Your caregiver will tell you what amount of weight loss should concern you or suggest another visit to your personal physician.
- Record your weight today. Compare this to your home scale and record all weights, time and date weighed. Try to check weight at the same time every day. Bring this chart to your caregiver if you need to be seen again.
- If running a fever, take and record temperatures.
- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- Ask your caregiver if you should continue all prescribed and over-the-counter medicines.
- If your caregiver has given you a follow-up appointment, it is very important to keep that appointment. Not keeping the appointment could result in a chronic or permanent injury, pain, and disability. If there is any problem keeping the appointment, you must call back to this facility for assistance.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You are unable to keep fluids down or other problems develop or you become worse in spite of treatment.
- Vomiting or diarrhea develops or is present and becomes continual.
- There is vomiting of blood or bile (green material).
- There is blood in the stool or the stools are black and tarry.
- There is no urine output in 6-8 hours or there is only a small amount of very dark urine.
- Abdominal pain develops, increases or localizes.
- You have an oral temperature above 102º F (38.9º C), not controlled with medications.
- You develop a rash, stiff neck, severe headache or become irritable or lethargic.
- You develop excessive weakness, dizziness, fainting or extreme thirst.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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