Why hydration is important for your health

- In order to remain healthy, our water gains and losses must be balanced – this is what constitutes good hydration.
- Our bodies are very efficient at regulating daily water intake balance provided adequate food and the right fluids are available.
- Even mild dehydration can adversely affect your physical and mental performance.
- These effects can be made worse if you have a hot working environment or need to wear protective clothing.
- It is therefore really important to make sure you drink enough fluids throughout the day.
- The best way to stay hydrated is to drink small amounts frequently. Keeping a water bottle to hand can help you do this, fill it with ice cubes if you work somewhere warm.
- Keep a check on your urine. As a general guide to hydration, it should be plentiful, pale in colour and odourless.
- If you find that you do not have time to get a drink or to use the toilet facilities at work, make sure you talk to your manager about this.
- If you are not used to drinking water regularly, try initially replacing just one of your other drinks a day with fresh water, increasing your consumption as the weeks go by.
- During exercise, drink at 10 to 15 minute intervals. Drink slowly and drink early, it’s physically easier to do this when you are still feeling fresh.
- Drinking very large amounts of water in one go should be avoided as your body may struggle to adjust to the change in fluids and this can lead to feelings of lethargy and nausea.

What happens when I’m dehydrated?

- There is currently no agreement about how much water we should drink each day. However a good rule of thumb for a sedentary day is 2 litres.
- We cannot rely on thirst alone as an indicator of dehydration because although we are dehydrated when we have lost 1% of body weight as a result of fluid loss, we may not actually feel thirsty until our dehydration levels reach 2%.
- Early signs of dehydration include light-headedness, dizziness, tiredness, irritability, headache, sunken features (particularly the eyes), flushed skin, heat intolerance, dry mouth, throat and eyes and skin that is loose and lacks elasticity.
- Once thirst is felt, mental performance can decrease by about 10%.
- Hand-eye motor coordination can also be impaired even at 1% dehydration, making it more difficult to perform delicate or detailed work. This may compromise safety in some situations.
- Headaches resulting from mild dehydration can often be relieved quickly (within 30 minutes) by drinking a large glass of water.
- When fluid intake and urination frequency are reduced the risk of getting a urinary tract infection can be doubled.
- Inadequate fluid intake is also one of the most frequent causes of chronic constipation.

Caffeine and alcohol

- Coffee, tea, coca cola and many ‘energy’ drinks contain caffeine which acts as a weak diuretic, and which means that these drinks won’t hydrate you as well as non-caffeinated drinks.
- If you enjoy tea or coffee it is a good idea to make sure you also have a glass or bottle of water in between cups.
- Alcohol also works as a diuretic therefore don’t start drinking alcohol if you are thirsty – quench your thirst with a non-alcoholic drink first.
  - Avoid salty snacks as these will only make you thirstier.
  - Ask for a jug of iced tap water with your meal when in restaurants and with your alcohol when in bars – good establishments will be happy to provide this.
  - Think about the strength of alcohol you drink – choose beers, lagers or spritzers that contain less alcohol and are therefore less dehydrating.

Water and weight maintenance

- If you are trying to maintain a healthy weight drinking water can help.
- Early signs of dehydration can feel like hunger pangs, try a glass of water first to see if you really are hungry.
- Swapping drinks can also help as regular fizzy drinks are packed full of sugar and calories. Juices, fruit drinks and smoothies also have a surprisingly high calorie content from their natural sugar content. Try alternating drinks with water or diluting fruit juice with sparkling or still water – you will soon adjust to the taste.

(Guidelines adapted from Wise up on water! Water in the workplace – Water UK 2006 via RCN.)