

Water Worries

How much H2O do you really need on the trail?

By [Christie Aschwanden](#), [Julie Cederborg](#), August 2003

Hope you're thirsty. "Backpackers typically require about 4 liters per day," says Mary Drumm, program director for High Sierra Outward Bound. But that's just an average. Cold, heat, body size, and altitude all raise the count. "At high altitude, you can lose 4 to 5 liters of water per day just through respiration, and that's on top of the water you're excreting through sweat and urine," says Drumm.

Don't forget that dehydration means more than just thirst. "A loss of 2 to 3 percent of your water weight can reduce performance by 10 percent," says Neal Henderson of BCSM. That means that even small drops in hydration can hold you back

Water Intoxication

By [Buck Tilton](#), *BACKPACKER* Contributing Editor, January 2006

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Q:

When I go hiking in hot weather (+20°C and up), I often arrive at camp with what I call a "dehydration headache." I've learned to deal with the problem by drinking lots of water and taking ibuprofen, but I read somewhere recently that too much water can also lead to problems. How much water is too much and what else can I do to combat this problem?

Brian L., via e-mail

A:

Sometimes called "water intoxication" or hyponatremia--meaning low sodium in the blood--drinking water all day without eating can reduce the sodium content in the blood to the point where it can be life threatening. Sodium is necessary to keep your heart functioning normally and maintain equilibrium in the body.

The first signs of a serious deficiency usually come as subtle changes in your ability to use your brain, things like confusion and lethargy. Your mental status will deteriorate as hyponatremia worsens and you'll probably be peeing a lot. Additionally, you might get a headache, soon followed by nausea, fatigue, weakness, lightheadedness, and muscle cramps.

The solutions are extremely simple, however--eat salty snacks and trade in a serving of water for a serving of sport's drink. Most trail foods are rich in salt, the source of sodium, and snacking every so often keeps your sodium level plenty high enough. Sport's drinks contain the electrolyte sodium and replacing water with one of these drinks will help keep your body balanced.

Buck Tilton, BACKPACKER Contributing Editor