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"It's Got Electrolytes": Say What?

Anyone who's watched a commercial for sports drinks has heard about electrolytes, but just what are they and why should you care?

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By Allison Ford

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Watching a commercial for [sports drinks](#) makes it seem like electrolytes are the very building blocks of nature. Ads for a certain product that [rhymes with](#) the word "Schmatorade" warn that we should all regularly supplement our diet with electrolyte-enriched beverages, since even walking to the kitchen for another Twinkie is enough exertion to cause a dangerous imbalance.

But what exactly *are* electrolytes, anyway? What do they do, and do we really need them as much as advertisers claim?

The Straight Talk

Electrolytes are basically salts—made from minerals like potassium, sodium, magnesium, and calcium—that help carry electrical impulses from cell to cell, regulating heart function, muscle performance, fluid regulation, and mental balance. Salts are important for the body, excreted in urine and sweat, and during periods of intense activity with heavy perspiration, it is possible for electrolyte levels to get out of balance.

But according to [Jill Daniels](#), a nutrition counselor and certified specialist in sports dietetics in the San Francisco Bay Area, most people don't need to worry about their electrolyte levels getting depleted. "For a normal person on an afternoon hike,

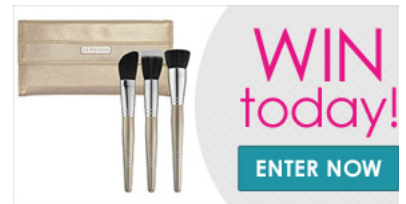
it's not a big deal," she says. "Unless he or she is a big sweater or is out for a few hours in the sun, they'll be fine just drinking water."

The average game of pickup basketball or daily jog is usually not strenuous enough to trigger an imbalance. The only people who really need to worry about monitoring their electrolyte levels are elite athletes, endurance runners, or anyone exercising at moderate to high intensity for long periods of time. For people exerting themselves at this high level, excessive sweating and the corresponding loss of electrolytes could result in symptoms like fatigue, light-headedness, and lack of motivation. "Some symptoms of hyponatremia [low levels of sodium] include a bloated stomach, puffy fingers and ankles, bad headache, and confusion," Daniels says. Low levels of potassium, also called hypokalemia, could even lead to heart rhythm-related problems.

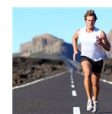
"There's nothing necessarily magical about sports drinks," Daniels says, but even for nonelite athletes, they do provide two vitally important benefits besides electrolytes: hydration and sugar. Despite its reputation for being not much better than sugary soda, the sugar in sports drinks does act as fuel for a workout. "If people are exercising at moderate intensity for ninety minutes or longer, they would benefit from putting a sports drink back into them," says Daniels, "but it's more for the fuel and hydration than for the electrolytes."

It's possible to replenish electrolytes on the spot through juice, rather than through sports drinks, but Daniels advises caution, since the concentrated sugars in fruit juices can end up causing cramping and discomfort. Sports drinks are formulated specifically to have the right amount of carbohydrates, as well as fewer calories and less sugar than most juices, and they're easier on athletes' stomachs. If someone adamantly wants to avoid traditional sports drinks, diluted

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fruit juice is a better choice, and even eating a bagel or a banana is enough to provide an extra nutritional boost.

"Most people who exercise are able to replace their electrolytes at their next meal," Daniels says. "If they have been sweating a lot and want to make sure to replace the lost sodium, they can eat a higher-sodium food or beverage, such as tomato juice, baked chips, pretzels, or pickles." Other foods—such as dark, leafy vegetables, salmon, spinach, tomatoes, nuts, and beans—are rich in nutrients like potassium, magnesium, and calcium.

The Takeaway

Electrolytes are important, but most of us don't need to worry about replenishing them. Forget about what commercials say—people who are moderately active can hydrate with water and get all the electrolytes they need from a healthy diet.

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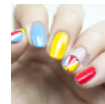
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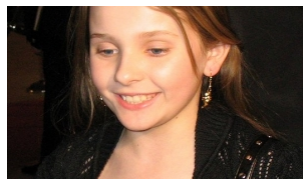
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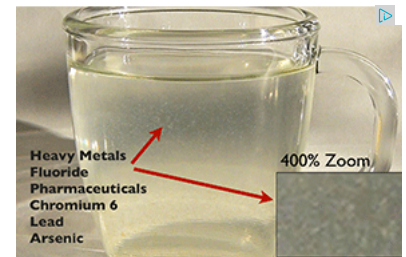
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