

FITNESS



KARL STOLLEIS/Special Contributor

Oh, that balmy mid-July Texas weather: Plano Bicycle Association president Chris Mathews takes a swig from his water bottle during a group ride.

Chugging along

For bike riders, hydration isn't always as simple as gulping a lot of water

Feeling wiped out and slightly sore should come as no surprise after finishing a long, hot bicycle ride. What worried Scott Mathews was the numbness in his hands and feet, and the sense of confusion within an hour after crossing the finish line of a 62-mile ride.

"I was feeling odd," he said. "I knew enough to know I was in trouble." Within three hours, he was in the hospital hooked up to an IV as doctors restored his sodium balance.

Mr. Mathews was suffering from hyponatremia, or "water intoxication." This potentially fatal condition happens when someone drinks so much water that his blood becomes diluted and his sodium level plummets.

Endurance athletes are among the most common victims of hyponatremia. They're losing sodium through sweat, and they're drinking lots of water to keep from being dehydrated.

"The message in the last 10 to 15 years is drink, drink, drink to make sure you're hydrated in the heat," said Jose Antonio, chief executive officer of the International Society of Sports Nutrition, who lives in Deerfield Beach, Fla. But it's just as important not to overhydrate.

Water is the easiest, cheapest option, and it's still better than nothing, experts say. But if drinking too much can cause problems, and if water lacks needed nutrients, then what should cyclists buy instead?

The key to making sure you've got the right stuff sloshing around in your bottles is to strike a balance, sports medicine experts say.

Several sports drinks, including the popular Gatorade and Powerade, offer water and sodium along with energy-providing carbohydrates and potassium. Some drinks even include protein for building muscle.

There is no one-drink-quenches-all solution. Individual tastes, thirsts and performance goals can all play into the best choice for a cyclist's swig.

Preventive drinking

The first rule of hydration is just remembering to drink. If a cyclist waits to drink until he's thirsty, "that means you're too late," and probably dehydrated, said Dr. Robert Vaughan, an exercise physiologist with the Baylor Tom Landry Fitness Center.

Cyclists who are perspiring heavily might still feel cool because the wind is drying their sweat, he said. Swimmers can have the same problem.

A general rule is to drink 8 ounces — or about a coffee cup's worth — of fluid every 15 minutes. That's for people out on a serious ride, he said.

"If you're just out riding around the

GEARING UP



PAULA LAVIGNE

neighborhood, you don't want to chug at that rate," he said.

Cyclists also should monitor hydration between rides, he said. By weighing themselves before and after a ride, they can see how much water weight they've lost.

Dr. Antonio said he just encourages people to drink as often as they can — preferably sports drinks — because it's a challenge to replace the moisture lost through perspiration.

Gulping down a few sports drinks during a ride will also give a cyclist an energy boost and, depending on the drink, will help muscles recover after the ride, he said.

"When you drink water, the only thing you're replacing is fluid lost through sweat. It keeps you from dying from heatstroke, but it has no effect on performance," he said.

He suggested Powerade and Gatorade for getting fluid and carbs for energy, along with electrolytes such as sodium and potassium.

Though people hear more about cutting down on sodium because of its ties to high blood pressure, Dr. Antonio said sodium is actually necessary for all sorts of body functions including nerve conduction and muscle contraction.

Other products such as Accelerade and Amino Vital also have protein to minimize muscle damage, he said.

Sports drink-averse

But some cyclists shun sports drinks because they taste icky, they upset their stomachs, or they're loaded with carbs — or calories.

Dr. Vaughan said another option is GU Energy Gel, a ketchuplike packet of concentrated carbohydrates designed to be quickly absorbed. It's similar to PowerGel, made by the same company that makes PowerBars.

The gels help athletes get a boost of carb energy without overdoing it, he said. The sugars in popular sports drinks, such as Gatorade, take too long to be absorbed into the

WHAT'S IN YOUR WATER BOTTLE?

We asked a few cyclists on a recent Saturday morning ride with the Plano Bicycle Association what they were drinking.

Chris Mathews, 57, president of the Plano Bicycle Association. He had one bottle of Gatorade in his front cage and one bottle of water in the other. "I've lost five pounds on a bike ride. It's all water."

Amy Fear-Bishop, 34, a racing cyclist visiting from Prairie Village, Kan. She had one bottle of water and one bottle of Perpetuem. Perpetuem is a powdered mix made by Hammer Nutrition that has carbohydrates, soy protein, fat, electrolytes and other goodies. "At least you don't have to be eating a gel" to get the same nutrients, she said.

Danielle Schwebach, 36, Plano. Danielle said she can't bulk up with protein drinks because she's an inline skater with the Texas Flyers in Dallas. So she had raspberry lemon Gatorade in her bottle and water in her Camelbak, a backpack with a long tube, or straw.

Jack and Lynette Lyon, both 37, Plano. Lynette is a bottled-water purist. The potassium in sports drinks upsets her stomach, she said. But husband Jack is concerned about overdosing on water, so he drinks Gatorade. "I sweat too much," he said.

Jeff Herbst, 46, New Hope in Collin County. Just plain ol' tap water. "I haven't found anything I really like the taste of," he said. He totes three bottles of water and fills up during his rides. In more than 10 years of cycling he's never overdosed on H₂O.

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The debate, the drinks: Log on for links to hydration resources mentioned and for further reading on the debate about what fuels cyclists best.

bloodstream, and athletes often have to dilute their drinks with water, he said.

Drinking or eating too much sugar can actually starve a person's body of water because the sugar draws water in the stomach, Dr. Vaughan said. He advises avoiding products with a sugar or glucose component exceeding 7.5 percent.

For cyclists avoiding sugars altogether, Dr. Antonio recommended a product called E-Lyte. E-Lyte Sport provides electrolytes, such as sodium and potassium, with no sugar and zero calories.

What not to drink

Both experts suggested avoiding alcohol because it can lead to dehydration. Some cyclists crave coffee or Coke because it charges them up.

But Dr. Vaughan suggested avoiding caffeinated beverages because they're diuretics — substances that cause someone to urinate more frequently — and could lead to dehydration. Dr. Antonio, however, cited research that this is not true. He said it's a commonly believed myth that caffeine can dry you out.

Pure, simple water is still a good guy. It's readily available and usually free (unless bottled with a fancy foreign name). Water works better than nothing, especially for cyclists going on a short, leisurely spin through the neighborhood, the experts said.

Cyclists who need to watch their water intake are those average riders tackling long endurance rides, such as next month's popular Hotter'N Hell Hundred at Wichita Falls, Dr. Vaughan said.

Getting acclimated

Most cyclists who've been riding outside all summer should have little to worry about because they've likely acclimated to the heat, Dr. Vaughan said. Cyclists lose more electrolytes in the spring when they first venture outdoors.

"Not so at this time of the year when you get through with a ride — unless you're eating Doritos," he said. "The body adapts, and it loses less electrolytes. By the end of summer, you're sweating pure water."

See for yourself, he said. "If you taste your sweat in August, compared to March, you'll notice it's a lot less salty."

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