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Things to Know When Keeping Kids Hydrated

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When it comes to hydrating kids, particularly those who are active, there are many choices: soda, juices, tea and coffee drinks, and bottled waters. And, let's not forget "power drinks". Power drinks can include anything from sports beverages to vitamin waters to "high-energy" supplement drinks. What they all have in common is added ingredients that say they "do" something extra, whether it's increase energy and alertness, boost nutrition, or even enhance athletic performance. But should kids drink them?

Everyone needs to stay hydrated to stay healthy, but does your child need something extra to avoid dehydration while being active? Not necessarily. The average child athlete can and should get all the necessary nutrients and hydration by eating healthy foods and drinking plenty of water before, during, and after exercise. During games and competitive events, drinks should be available at all times and regular water breaks should be scheduled about every 15 or 20 minutes. Soda is not recommended for hydration during sports and should be avoided because it contains excess sugar and caffeine. The caffeine will cause frequent urination and may promote instead of prevent dehydration.

Sports drinks may be beneficial if your child participates in sports that last longer than an hour. These drinks contain carbohydrates (sugar), which can provide an immediate source of energy at a time when the body's stores are becoming depleted. Sports drinks also contain electrolytes like sodium and potassium, which the body loses through sweat, that are necessary to keep the body's fluid levels in balance and for muscles to work properly. Remember these drinks contain calories. Sports drinks should only be used when active and in moderation. They should never be used as a casual drink.

Vitamin water, fitness waters or enhanced waters, come in many flavors and contain various combinations of supplemental vitamins and minerals. They also often contain extra calories, artificial sweeteners, caffeine, or herbal ingredients whose effects have not been studied in children. These “waters” could provide too much of a good a thing, particularly if your child already takes a daily multivitamin. Getting more than the recommended daily allowance of some vitamins and minerals can be harmful to a child’s health. Keep in mind that the daily allowances listed on the label are recommendations for adults, not kids.

Energy drinks are becoming increasingly popular with middle and high school students who are looking for a competitive edge. Most energy drinks are clearly labeled as unsuitable for children. Energy drinks deliver a strong dose of sugar and caffeine – sometimes as much as in 1 to 3 cups of coffee. Think about when you have had too much caffeine! Too much caffeine in younger kids can negatively affect attention and concentration. And, too much sugar can lead to excessive weight gain and a trip to the dentist’s office.

Many of the aforementioned drinks also contain additional ingredients whose safety or effectiveness has never been tested in children; including herbal supplements such as, guarana (a source of caffeine, and taurine (an amino acid thought to enhance performance).

In the end, remember: Energy drinks offer no real health or performance benefit for kids. Encouraging kids to believe that they need something “extra” to perform at their best may lead to the use of other performance enhancing substances down the road. Always remember that if it sound too good to be true, it probably is! Read labels and talk to your child’s doctor if you have any questions or concerns. Also, teach your child not to be so quick to believe the hype when it comes to sports drinks. Nothing beats a well-balanced diet and drinking plenty of “regular” water.

For additional information, check out the Gatorade Sports Science web page at www.gssiweb.com.