

Hydration, Energy and Mental Wellbeing

Small sips can support the body and mind. Hydration affects circulation, temperature control, digestion and normal brain function. When intake drops, tiredness, headache, dizziness, dry mouth, constipation and difficulty concentrating may appear. These signs have many possible causes, so persistent or severe symptoms need assessment.

There is no perfect number

Fluid needs vary with body size, age, pregnancy, activity, weather, fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, medicines and health conditions. NHS guidance often uses six to eight glasses as a general guide, but some people need more and some have medically prescribed limits. Pale yellow urine can be a useful everyday sign, although supplements, medicines and illness can change its colour.

Why drinking can be difficult

- Reduced awareness of thirst, distraction or executive-function difficulties.
- Sensory discomfort with temperature, taste, smell, cup, straw or the feeling of liquid.
- Fear of toilets, incontinence, swallowing, nausea or reflux.
- ARFID, anxiety, depression, low energy or disrupted routines.
- Limited access to drinks at work, school, travel or appointments.

Make the next sip easier

- Keep a preferred drink visible and within reach.
- Try a familiar bottle, open cup, straw or measured glass.
- Test cold, room-temperature, warm, still or sparkling options.
- Link drinking to existing moments: waking, meals, medication, breaks and arriving home.
- Use reminders as invitations, not criticism.
- Increase gently; sudden large amounts may feel uncomfortable.

What counts?

Water is useful, but milk, plant drinks, tea, coffee, soups and other drinks also contribute. Some foods contain fluid too. The most suitable choice depends on allergies, intolerances, sensory needs, dental health and nutrition. A "less ideal" drink that is reliably tolerated may be safer than water that remains untouched.

Caffeine, energy drinks and alcohol

Caffeinated drinks still contribute fluid, but caffeine can worsen anxiety, palpitations, tremor, reflux or sleep for some people. Energy drinks may contain substantial caffeine and sugar. Alcohol can contribute to dehydration and can interact with medicines. Notice timing, amount and personal effects rather than using rigid moral rules.

When you are unwell

Vomiting, diarrhoea, fever and heavy sweating increase fluid and electrolyte losses. Small frequent sips may be easier. A pharmacist can advise whether an oral rehydration solution is appropriate. Children, older adults and people with some conditions can become unwell more quickly.

Medication and health conditions

Some medicines affect thirst, urination or fluid balance. Heart, kidney, liver and endocrine conditions may require individual targets or fluid restriction. Do not deliberately increase water beyond medical advice. Ask a pharmacist or clinician if symptoms began after a medicine change.

Signs that need prompt help

- Very little or very dark urine, persistent dizziness, unusual sleepiness or confusion.
- Fast breathing or heartbeat, fainting, inability to keep fluids down, or worsening weakness.
- Signs of severe dehydration in a baby or child, including reduced responsiveness.

Use NHS 111 for urgent advice when it is not an immediate emergency. Call 999 for collapse, severe confusion, breathing difficulty or another life-threatening emergency.

A gentle hydration plan

- **My easiest drink:** _____
- **Preferred cup, bottle or straw:** _____
- **Best temperature:** _____
- **Three natural drinking moments:** _____
- **Barrier I want to reduce:** _____
- **Person who can support me:** _____

Supporting another person

Offer choices without repeatedly monitoring, bargaining or shaming. Keep preferred drinks available, accept sensory needs and make toilet access predictable. For ARFID, do not remove safe drinks to force water. Explore changes collaboratively and seek dietetic or medical support when intake is limited or dehydration recurs.

A message from Maggie

Hydration advice can sound simple when the barriers are anything but simple. Start with what is genuinely drinkable, comfortable and available to you. A small, repeatable sip is meaningful progress; support should make drinking feel safer, not turn it into another test you can fail.

Maggie Learoyd MNCPS

Psychotherapist | ADHD, Autism & ARFID Specialist

Founder, Space to Breathe Therapy

Sources and further information

NHS - Water, drinks and your health; Dehydration: [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

NHS - Diarrhoea and vomiting; oral rehydration advice: [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

British Dietetic Association - Fluid and hydration information: [bda.uk.com](https://www.bda.uk.com)

Speak with a GP, pharmacist or registered dietitian for individual advice.

Current UK guidance checked September 2026. Educational information only; this guide does not replace personalised medical or dietetic advice.