

# Fluid Guidelines For Young Athletes

By Suzanne Nelson, Sc.D., RD

Surprising, as it may seem, the most important part of an athlete's diet isn't what they eat, it is what and how much they drink. Hydration before, during and after exercise is especially important for preadolescent children because they have [special fluid needs](#) compared to adults, or even teenagers. As a parent or coach, you are responsible for taking [precautions](#) to prevent [heat illnesses](#) in exercising children and making sure they drink enough fluids.

One of the most important functions of water is to cool the body. As a child exercises, his muscles generate heat, raising his body temperature. When the body gets hot, it sweats. The evaporating sweat cools the body. If the child does not replace the water lost through sweating by drinking more fluids, the body's water balance will be upset and the body may overheat.

To keep from becoming [dehydrated](#), your child must drink fluids before, during and after exercise. To promote fluid intake in kids, fluids containing salt (i.e. sports drinks) have been shown to increase voluntary drinking by 90% and prevent dehydration compared to drinking plain water. To ensure that your child is drinking enough, you should see that she drinks fluids according to the following schedule:

## Ages 6 to 12:

### Before Sports

Drinking fluids prior to exercise appears to reduce or delay the detrimental effects of dehydration.

- 1 to 2 hours before sports: 4 to 8 ounces of cold water
- 10 to 15 minutes before sports: 4 to 8 ounces of cold water

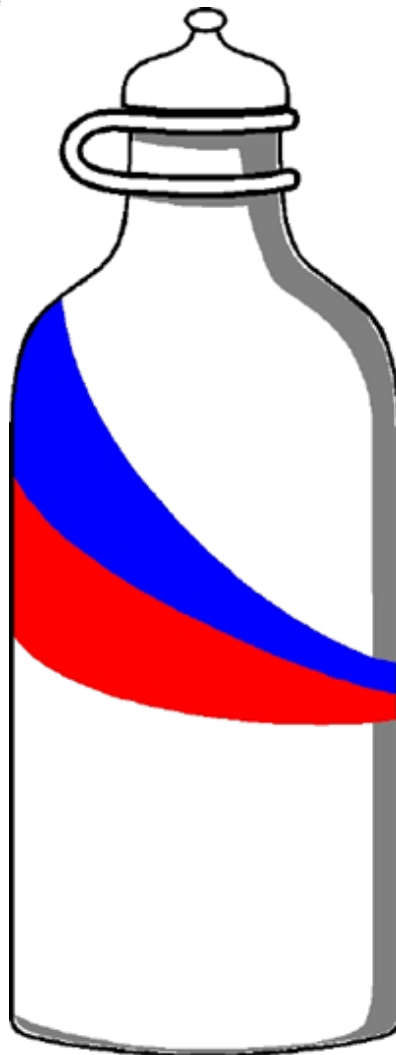
### During Sports

- Every 20 minutes: 5 to 9 ounces of a sports drink, depending on weight (5 for a child weighing 88 pounds, 9 ounces for a child weighing 132 pounds)

### After Sports

Post-exercise hydration should aim to correct any fluid lost during the practice.

Within two hours: at least 24 ounces of a sports drink for every pound of weight lost



## Ages 13 to 18:

### Before Sports

Drinking fluids prior to exercise appears to reduce or delay the detrimental effects of dehydration.

- 1 to 2 hours before sports: 8 to 16 ounces of cold water
- 10 to 15 minutes before sports: 8 to 12 ounces of cold water

### During Sports

- Every 20 minutes: Between 5 and 10 ounces of a sports drink, depending on weight

### After Sports

Post-exercise hydration should aim to correct any fluid lost during the practice.

- Within two hours: at least 24 ounces of a sports drink for every pound of weight lost

*Suzanne Nelson is the head of Husky Sports Nutrition Services at the University of Washington and a nationally recognized sports nutritionist. She is co-author of [Ultimate Sports Nutrition \(2nd ed.\)](#)(Bull Publishing).*