



How to Handle Dehydration as a Healthcare Professional

A guide towards working more efficient with measuring fluid intake.



Dehydration as a health issue

Dehydration a huge problem worldwide within the care industry – especially when we are looking at the elderly population. It is also a very common problem within the elderly population which often leads to a decrease in the physical as well as mental health, a decrease in quality of life for the individual resident, and a need for extra and specialized care.

Dehydrated residents and the task of rehydrating them is no easy healthcare task to manage. Which is why we in co-operation with Peter Bie, MD, DMSc,

professor emeritus at the University of Southern Denmark, will focus on the problem of dehydration among the elderly population.

We will also look into how you can create a more efficient process for monitoring liquid intake, so you can gain valid, trustworthy data to use in your care of your residents.

So, are you looking for inspiration on how to work with the health issue dehydration as a healthcare professional then this piece is for you!

The importance of hydration

The reason hydration is such a huge focus area in the healthcare industry is the huge impact dehydration has on the individual's health and wellbeing. At the same time, the fluid balance is very delicate so not much is needed to tip the scale, and it is easy to drink both too little and too much.

To specify why staying hydrated is so important let us first look at the fluid balance and why we need our bodies to be sufficiently hydrated.



Fluid balance explained

The human body contains around 40 liters of fluid. Out of the 40 liters only 14 liters is placed outside the cells supporting the transport that happens in the blood. For the body to be able to support this transport the fluid balance must be obtained.

Therefore, several body functions will be affected if the fluid balance is out of order. Out of the 14 liters around 2-3 liters are spent during the day, so naturally the body will need equal new amounts of fluid. This is provided through drinking and eating. If the fluid intake is more or less than the 2-3 liters the body tries to regulate. That is done either by frequent urination in the case of overhydration and feeling thirst plus low production of concentrated urine in the case of dehydration.

But elderly don't feel thirst as much as younger people do which is also why elderly can go for a longer period of time before dehydration is detected. In the case of dehydration other symptoms will start to show as the time goes by.

Below you will find a list of the symptoms known to be common in connection to dehydration.

Symptoms of dehydration

- Physical discomfort (headache, dizziness etc.)
- Confusion
- Low mobility

How to treat dehydration

The proper treatment of dehydration the treatment is of course to rehydrate and reach a sufficient fluid intake that evens the fluid balance once more.

Studies have shown that what fluids we drink to rehydrate is less important than the fact to get some sort of fluid back into the system.

So, the myths about staying clear of some drinks like coffee is nothing but a myth since no studies can document that coffee should affect the fluid balance negatively. So, if coffee is the favorite drink of your resident don't feel bad about offering it as a way to get your resident to drink.

To give the right amount of fluid is essential for both resident and staff since it will mean extra attention to

toilet visits, potential risks of leaking etc. if too much fluid is given in the attempt of rehydrating.

So, the fluid intake must be monitored to provide the best care possible. Also, too little fluid results in a decrease of physical and mental health. Once rehydrated the resident can experience an increase in mobility, decrease in confusion and an overall increase of his or hers quality of life. Hence why an obtained fluid balance is so important.

There are even some cases that indicate that with the sufficient amount of fluid an elderly resident is able to stay at home and receive care here longer than a resident that is not getting the right amount of fluid.

How to work with hydration as a caregiver

The way to work with hydration, so it benefits both you and your residents is to use the tools available for measurement. Normally that will mean a fluid balance chart – some use the good old paper chart and others use a digital solution for measuring fluid intake.

What is also equally important apart from measuring the fluid balance is to be aware of the different signs of

dehydration and the factors that affects the fluid balance – like medication.

Below we will deep-dive into the signs of dehydration and how medication can play a role, so you will know what to be aware of.



How to spot signs of dehydration

As a nurse or caregiver, you probably already know what to look for when spotting over- or dehydration. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of all the small signs that might indicate that a resident is overhydrated or dehydrated.

Overhydration is often shown by frequent toilet visits and a less concentrated urine. Dehydration on the other hand is often harder to detect right away since it is difficult to know exactly when a resident is dehydrated. Some

signs to dehydration are very clear: Less frequent urination and a dark yellow color of the urine. But other signs are harder to base a diagnose on.

As an example, confusion is one of the symptoms of dehydration. But it can be hard to tell for you as a caregiver if the confusion is due to lack of fluid or due to a condition like dementia. This is also, why it is so important to have reliable data to look at when taking care of your residents.



How medication can affect the fluid balance

There are certain factors which affects the individual's fluid balance. For instance, residents on diuretics like heart and blood pressure medication will be more likely to dehydrate since the medication is affecting the fluid balance in that direction.

This is one of the reasons why it can be difficult to work with dehydration as a caregiver, because all factors playing a role in the individual's fluid balance needs to be taken into account. It is difficult reach the sufficient amount of fluid needed.

It is individual, and depends on a number of factors like, how well hydrated is a resident, what is the medical history, what medication is taken to mention a few.



First steps to implement data in your workprocess

Using data is not just about finding, reading, and fill them into a chart. It is also about applying them to your practice and professional decision-making.

To use data effectively as a caregiver or nurse, you must do the following:

1. You need to evaluate the situation and the patient's needs, preferences, and values.
2. Then, you must compare the data that you have available with the current practice and the patient's situation.
3. Decide on the best course of action based on the data, your clinical judgment, and the patient's/relatives' input.
4. Implement the action and monitor the outcomes.
5. Finally reflect on the process and the results, and make adjustments.

To make this process work it is important to be able to gather reliable and valid data.

To do so you need to ask yourself:

- 1: *How am I gathering my data today?*
- 2: *Is it done the best way possible?*

If the answer currently is 1: **manually** and 2: **no** or **I don't know** then read on to improve your way of gathering data on your residents' fluid balance.

How to use data to care for your residents

The one tool caregivers and nurses have to measure the fluid intake is not as reliable as you might think.

Studies show that a fluid balance chart is an excellent tool in theory, but in practice the data gathered is not very reliable due to the manual process. If you are using a manual paper version of a fluid balance chart your data is collected in a way that does not deliver data of a certain quality – making it hard to work with the data.

To move forward you should look into how to optimize the way you are gathering data about your residents' fluid balance.

One way is by automating the data collection through digital care solutions. A computer will gather data about fluid intake much more accurate and thus increase the reliability of your data while freeing up time for conversations with your resident and other healthcare tasks.

You can learn more on digital care solutions

on abena.com.

We are here to help and guide you in providing the best care possible.

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