

Do we need sports drinks?

by Bob Rauner,
MD MPH
Director of
Partnership
for a Healthy
Lincoln



I am occasionally asked whether sports drinks are good for you. The answer is sometimes we need sports drinks and sometimes we don't. Sports drinks were designed for specific reasons, but marketing and the pursuit of higher sales have pushed sports drinks far beyond their intended purpose.

The history of sports drinks is quite an interesting story and starts in 1965 with the Florida Gators football team. One of the assistant coaches saw that players often struggled an hour or so into practice and asked a group of university physicians if they could help. They found that dehydration and loss of electrolytes (sodium & potas-

sium) through sweat were the main problem. They even collected sweat from athletes to analyze its electrolyte composition. They used this to help guide the recipe for a beverage that helped fix the problem and give the football team a competitive edge. It later became marketed as a sports drink to help other athletes. The name of that beverage was based on the Florida team's mascot – Gatorade. Now, no self-respecting football team would be caught without a cooler full of their favorite brand name sports drink on the sideline. Which brand ends up on the sideline mostly depends on who pays the most to be the sponsor.

Other athletes have found sports drinks to be helpful for their sports as well (e.g. soccer, basketball) and sometimes even life-saving (e.g. marathon

runners). I've seen this myself covering the Lincoln marathon and even at one of my daughter's soccer games last year where the goalie collapsed from heat exhaustion on the field during a very hot and humid July game. The prevention and treatment for the problem was sports drinks.

The downside, though, is that marketing and the pursuit of increased sales has pushed sports drinks into places they don't belong. Sports drinks are unnecessary unless you are working out very hard (full court basketball, competitive runs), for sustained periods (an hour or more), and dripping with sweat (hot days or high intensity exertion). For most of us during our average work outs, water is just fine. There is no need for sports drinks for pickup basketball games in the morning, a 2-3 mile jog, or

most YMCA youth sporting events. The downside to the overuse of sports drinks is a lot of unnecessary calories that likely exceed the amount that was burned off. The classic example of this misuse is the "after game snack" brought by a parent, where our kids burn off about 100 calories playing youth sports that is promptly replaced by 80 calories of Gatorade and a 150 calorie cupcake or cookie. Unfortunately, this can negate the health benefit of your kid being involved in youth sports!

So in short, sports drinks are good when they are needed, but may add to our obesity problem when they are overused. Use sports drinks when there is a good reason, otherwise stick with water.

Published in Lincoln Kids Summer 2013

STOP!

Rethink your DRINK

Go On GREEN

RED

YELLOW

GREEN

Drink Rarely, if at all

- Regular Sodas
- Sports Drinks*
- Sweetened Coffee Drinks
- Energy Drinks
- Sweetened Tea
- Fruit & Juice Drinks with added sugar

*Sports drinks are unnecessary for general consumption. They are for rehydration during high-intensity exertion such as marathon running or strenuous exercise outdoors on high heat index days (ex: summer soccer or football).

Drink Sometimes

- Diet Sodas
- Diet Iced Tea
- 100% Juice
- Chocolate/Flavored Milk
- Low Calorie Drinks
- Low Sugar Drinks
- Low Calorie Sports Drinks (ex: G2)

Drink Freely

- Water
- Seltzer Water
- Skim or 1% Milk
- Unsweetened Tea
- Unsweetened Coffee