

# Debating the merits of sports drinks

You've just sweated it out at the gym and need to quench your thirst. If your automatic response is to reach for a sports drink, you could be doing more harm than good.

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**SPORTS DRINKS:** performance enhancers for athletes or well-marketed sugar water? The debate intensified recently when Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) proposed easing restrictions on the health claims that manufacturers of such beverages could make<sup>1</sup>.

While traditional sports drinks are designed to provide athletes with the right balance of carbohydrates, fluids and electrolytes during exercise, some groups suggest they do more harm than good.

## The pros

Sports drinks are most useful during intense, prolonged exercise (such as training for a marathon) and can help performance, says Melbourne-based advanced sports dietitian Lisa Middleton. "They provide carbohydrates

to fuel the body," she says. "This can delay fatigue, so you work harder during exercise. They also provide fluid and electrolytes, and the flavour can stimulate greater fluid intake to combat dehydration."

While Sports Dietitians Australia advises that sports drinks are primarily designed for use during exercise, they can also be consumed beforehand – to increase muscle glycogen fuel levels and reduce urine losses – and to aid recovery afterwards<sup>2</sup>.

## The cons

One of the main drawbacks of sports drinks is that they contain sugar – though only half the sugar of most soft drinks, explains Middleton – and calories. "So, if you're at an aerobics class, you don't need a sports drink, as it's just adding extra calories while you're

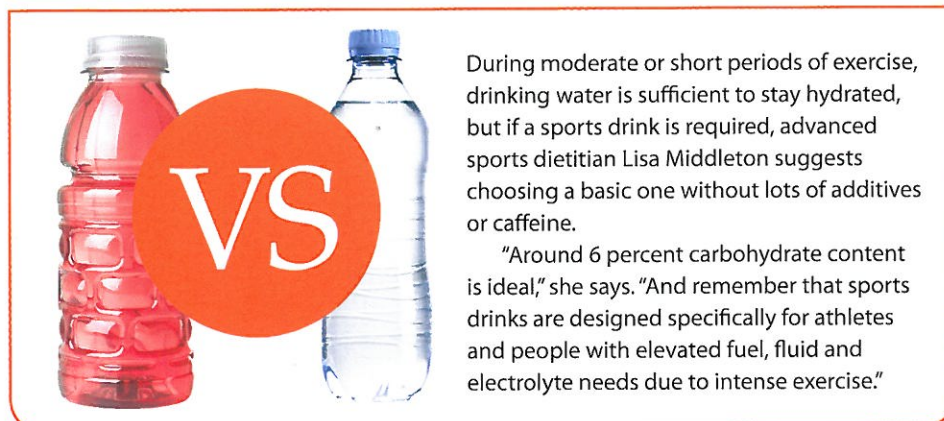
working hard to burn them off," she says. "They also contain sodium, which may not need replacing if you're not losing it through sweat."

As well as a sugar component, sports drinks contain acid, which attacks tooth enamel, so Sports Dietitians Australia recommends athletes squirt the drinks into the back of the mouth and follow with a rinse of water to minimise damage to their teeth<sup>2</sup>.

## So, should you drink them?

Opinion is divided. The Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) argues that sports drinks are high in sugar and generally unhealthy – and that allowing them to carry health claims could mislead the public into thinking they were healthier choices than water<sup>3</sup>.

Yet the Australian Beverages Council takes the stance that there are advantages to hydrating with sports drinks – but only for people who truly need them. "These types of sports drinks are absolutely for people who engage in intensive exercise," said CEO Geoff Parker in a media statement in October 2014<sup>4</sup>. "These drinks are not suitable for a kids' swimming carnival, when the eight-year-old only has to swim 25 metres. In most instances, water is absolutely the best drink for them." @



During moderate or short periods of exercise, drinking water is sufficient to stay hydrated, but if a sports drink is required, advanced sports dietitian Lisa Middleton suggests choosing a basic one without lots of additives or caffeine.

"Around 6 percent carbohydrate content is ideal," she says. "And remember that sports drinks are designed specifically for athletes and people with elevated fuel, fluid and electrolyte needs due to intense exercise."

References: 1 [www.foodstandards.gov.au/code/proposals/Pages/P1030HealthclaimsSportsfoods.aspx](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/code/proposals/Pages/P1030HealthclaimsSportsfoods.aspx) 2 [sportsdietitians.com.au/resources/upload/file/Sports%20Drinks.pdf](http://sportsdietitians.com.au/resources/upload/file/Sports%20Drinks.pdf) 3 [opc.org.au/latestnews/mediareleases/pages/fat-chance-of-fair-game.aspx](http://opc.org.au/latestnews/mediareleases/pages/fat-chance-of-fair-game.aspx) 4 [australianbeverages.org/changed-labelling-sports-drinks-minimal-australian-consumers/](http://australianbeverages.org/changed-labelling-sports-drinks-minimal-australian-consumers/)