Stay off the sidelines by staying hydrated

Doctors say it's important that youth athletes know how to prevent, spot and treat dehydration

Compared to adults, kids may be thinking more about what activity is next and less about the signals their bodies are sending. And during sports, kids can experience dehydration – when the body loses more fluids than it takes in – quickly. Awad Alyami, MD, an OSF HealthCare pediatrician, wants kids, parents and coaches to know best practices.

"The first concern is kids starting their sports participation *already* dehydrated. They're not drinking enough water prior to the practice or game," Dr. Alyami says. He says youth athletes should start hydrating two to four hours before physical activity. "The other priority is ongoing rehydration during and after the practice or game."

Staying hydrated and safe is as simple as drinking water. Electrolyte drinks are another option for vigorous workouts, but avoid excess consumption of high-sugar drinks like sports drinks, energy drinks and soda. Water flavored with lemon is another option if kids get bored with plain water. Either way, athletes should keep a water bottle or a cooler with drinks handy.

Adults should encourage hydration breaks (try setting an alarm to remind everyone it's time for a break), and empower kids to speak up if they're not feeling well. Signs of dehydration include fatigue, dizziness, dry mouth, headache, darker urine and crying with no tears. Wearing extra clothing, like football pads, can also cause you to lose fluids by sweating.

Adults should have an overall emergency plan if a youth athlete gets hurt. Know what to do and who to call. Have a first aid kit handy, make sure the kids' parents know the day's plan and have cell phones charged in case you need to call 9-1-1 from a sports field that's not near a building.

"Ask if athletes have had heat illnesses in the past. For ones who are prone to those, you can give them more breaks. They can sit in the shade or on the sideline," Dr. Alyami suggests. "Keep an eye on symptoms. Look for the kids who are feeling weak, fatigued, dizzy or are just not doing well."

Though rare, it is possible to drink too much water in a short period, leading to symptoms like nausea, cramps, swelling and discolored hands and feet, drowsiness, confusion and even seizures. If you're drinking a lot of water and start to feel unwell, stop drinking and seek medical help.

Learn more

More resources on staying hydrated from OSF HealthCare:

OSF HealthCare blog: Why you should be drinking more water

Infused water recipes

OSF HealthCare library: Dehydration

OSF HealthCare Newsroom: How much water is too much?

OSF HealthCare Newsroom: Sneaky signs you may be dehydrated