

I am not drinking enough

Introduction

Many aspects of your life can be affected after being critically ill, and this includes how your body feels and how you are eating. It may be that you find eating more difficult than before and you may feel worried or low because of your difficulties.

Often, these problems get better as you get stronger, but you may need some help or advice while this is happening. This information sheet looks at common problems around eating after critical illness and gives you tips about what may help.

This information forms part of advice on 'Nutrition and recovery after critical illness', and is a sub-section of the '[Tips to help with eating problems after Critical illness](#)' leaflet. Also see the '[Nutrition when at home](#)' and '[Nutrition in the hospital](#)' information. Nutrition is the term used to describe what you eat or drink to give you energy and other nutrients to help your body recover and stay healthy.

Having this information may help you to understand more about nutrition, how it can help your recovery and overcome any difficulties with eating after your critical illness. We hope it will help you and your family, but if you have any particular nutritional questions or worries, please ask your doctor for help or see if they can refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian is a registered health care professional who advises about nutrition for health and during illness.

You can check how healthy your current weight is for your height on the NHS website¹. There are also very good self-screening tools to use to check whether you should be worried about how your low weight or poor eating may affect your health from the Patients Association² and BAPEN³.

If you have ongoing difficulties with eating, even after this advice, if you have a low weight or are continuing to lose weight or strength, do speak to your doctor or ask to see a dietitian.

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/>

² <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=3449fca0-dc52-4f06-ac75-3050b71d7bb5>

³ <https://www.malnutritionselfscreening.org/>

I'm not drinking enough

It is important that you drink enough during your recovery from critical illness. When we don't drink enough, it can make us tired, dizzy, confused or give us headaches. If you are older, this might mean that you could have a fall or and your skin may be thinner. If we don't drink enough, this is called being dehydrated. If you are dehydrated for a long time, it can lead to problems which might need medical treatment.

How can dehydration happen?

Dehydration happens when you use or lose more fluid than you take in. As well as not drinking enough, things that can cause dehydration are:

- being sick
- having an upset stomach (Diarrhoea)
- having a temperature (38C or more)
- having diabetes that is not well controlled
- sweating after exercise or during hot weather
- medicines that make you wee more (called diuretics)
- drinking too much caffeine
- drinking too much alcohol. It is recommended not to regularly drink more than 14 units per week (14 units is equivalent to a bottle and a half of wine or five pints of export-type lager (5% abv) over a week)
- difficulty in drinking enough, for example if you are confused and don't want to drink or if you find it difficult to swallow.

If you are finding it difficult to drink enough, speak to a healthcare professional.

The main way to know if you are dehydrated is if you feel thirsty. Other signs to look out for include:

- if your wee is dark yellow or smells strongly
- if you wee less than you usually do, or don't wee much when you do go to the toilet
- feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- having a headache
- having low energy and feeling tired
- having dry skin, mouth, lips or eyes.

Everyone needs different amounts of fluids every day, but as a rough guide, try to have 30-35 ml of fluids per kilogram of body weight per day. So, for a 70kg (11 stone) person this would be about 2000-2500ml (about 3.5 to 4.5 pints), whereas for a 50kg (8 stone) person this would be about 1500-1750ml (about 2.5 to 3 pints) a day.

If you are sweating more (e.g. in hot weather or after exercise) or have some of the risk factors for dehydration, then you may need to drink more than this amount.

However, if a healthcare professional has advised you not to drink too much (for example, because of a medical condition), then you should follow their advice.

How can I drink enough?

Having enough to drink is important. These tips may help you:

- Water is a great option, but you can drink other things as well. Liquid foods such as soup, ice cream or custard also help you get liquid in your body. However, remember that some drinks (fizzy drinks, fruit juice, smoothies) can be very high in sugar and should not be drunk too often, especially if you are concerned about weight gain or blood sugar control. You can add water to fruit juice down to make it lower in sugars.
- Keep a reusable water bottle with you and sip it and refill it often. Some drinking bottles have markings on them to show you how much you could drink each hour.
- Set yourself drinking goals each day, such as drinking a glass of water at the beginning of each hour, or a glass of water before each meal.

Summary

Drinking enough is important as it helps our bodies work well. Try to drink enough each day, but if this is difficult or you are worried, please discuss this with your doctor.

More information:

British Dietetic Association Food Fact Sheets on:

- Fluid (water and drinks) <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/fluid-water-drinks.html>
- Alcohol facts <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/alcohol-facts.html>

NHS UK advice on:

- Alcohol <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/calculating-alcohol-units/>

See ICUsteps information for more information <https://icusteps.org/information>

This information sheet forms part of the wider Tips to help with eating problems after critical illness: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/tips-to-help-with-eating-problems-after-critical-illness.html>

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Our information and general advice is based on experiences of former ICU patients and it should not replace the advice you receive from healthcare professionals. The BDA and ICUsteps cannot accept responsibility or liability from the use of this resource.