

# Do You Really Need a Sports Drink?

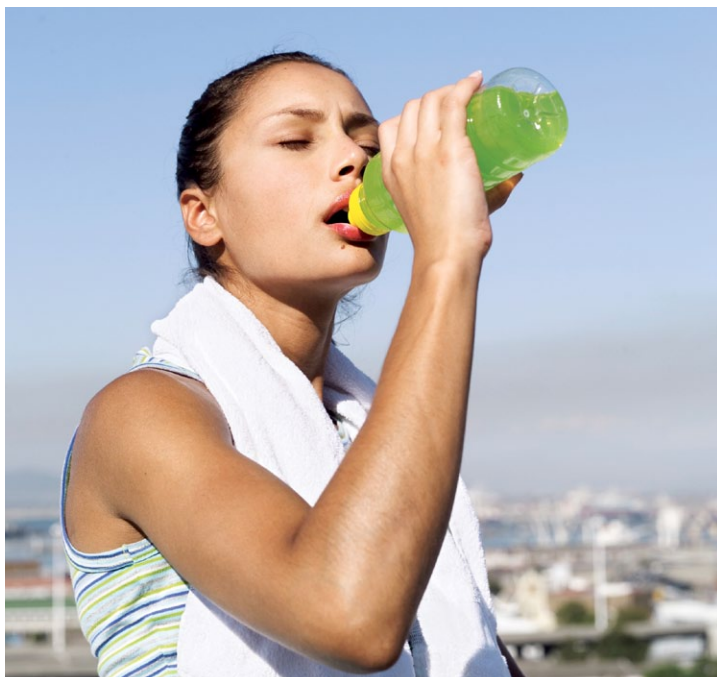
**Y**ou're heading to the gym to work out but want to pick up a dose of hydration on the way. With so many choices, you might wonder, how do you choose the right one? But the first question you should ask yourself is, do you really need a sports drink or do you just want one?

The first sports drink was created for a college football team after its coach noticed that the players, working out long and hard in the Southern summer heat, weren't playing at their best. Gatorade was created for those Florida Gators to replenish the nutrients they were losing.

Fast-forward some 40 years and practically everyone (even little children) is walking around sipping a bottle of neon-colored liquid. But most of these people aren't working out intensely in summer heat, so for them, the drinks are really unnecessary.

Who does need to drink these sugary, electrolyte-filled beverages? Anyone exercising or working intensely for more than an hour. Think marathoners, bikers, or other athletes or people being continuously active for 60 minutes or more. This doesn't mean the person who plays a pickup basketball game for two hours but spends a majority of the time standing around.

But what if you simply like sports drinks? It may be OK to drink them, but if you need to watch your weight, you probably should reconsider. The main nutrients in sports drinks, and what makes them so beneficial to athletes, are sodium, potassium, and carbohydrates such as sugar. They generally don't contain enough sodium or potassium to cause harm if you drink them when you're not exercising strenuously (unless you've been advised to cut down on your salt intake). But the carbohydrates can be a problem if you're trying to lose or maintain your weight.



A typical 32-ounce bottle of sports drink contains about 56 grams of carbohydrates—all sugar. That's roughly 14 teaspoons of sugar and 200 calories. If you're trying to shed a few pounds, those are 200 calories your body doesn't need. Fortunately, most sports drink makers have developed low- or no-calorie products. You get the same taste you love along with some electrolytes but much less, if any, sugar and calories. And since you won't be getting the carbohydrates, and, therefore, an energy source needed only for a long, intense workout, these drinks are appropriate for that brisk walk, Zumba class, or morning jog.

The bottom line: If you're planning an extreme workout or are not concerned with losing weight, any traditional sports drink will work for you. If, on the other hand, your workout is more relaxed or you're hoping to drop a few pounds, look for those labeled "zero" or "low cal." ♣

— Heidi Reichenberger McIndoo, MS, RD, LDN