



The Fatal Five: Dehydration



What is dehydration?

Dehydration happens when a person's body doesn't have enough fluids to function properly. If a person doesn't drink enough, or doesn't replace fluids they have lost, they can become dehydrated.

What causes dehydration?

Some common causes of dehydration are:

- Not drinking enough water or other fluids
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Excessive sweating from high heat or exercise
- Certain medications, like diuretics, laxatives, and some high blood pressure medications
- Loss of appetite or other stomach issues
- Difficulty swallowing

WHAT ARE THE FATAL FIVE?

The fatal five are preventable conditions that can be deadly for individuals with I/DD. The five conditions are:



Dehydration



Seizures



Constipation



Aspiration



Sepsis



Why is dehydration dangerous?

Dehydration can cause serious problems, like:

- **Electrolyte imbalance:** This occurs when the levels of certain minerals, like sodium (salt), potassium, and calcium, become too high or low. Consistent levels of these minerals are necessary for a person's nerves, muscles, brain, and heart to work properly.
- **Strain on the heart:** When a person is dehydrated, their heart has to work harder to pump blood throughout the body. This can cause low blood pressure, which can lead to dizziness, fainting, or even shock.
- **Kidney problems:** People who are dehydrated don't urinate often enough, which can lead to kidney infections and may cause painful kidney stones to form.
- **Organ damage:** Dehydration over an extended period of time can damage vital organs, like the kidneys, liver, heart, and brain.

What are the symptoms?

A dehydrated person can experience:

- Dry skin
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Fainting
- Confusion
- Rapid breathing
- Irregular or rapid heartbeat
- Muscle problems (weakness, spasms, cramps, twitching, or numbness)
- Thirst

It's important to note that by the time a person feels thirsty, they are already dehydrated. Don't wait until someone says they are thirsty before encouraging them to drink.





What can DSPs do to help prevent dehydration?

Because DSPs work so closely with the individuals they support, they may spot symptoms before anyone else does. They also have many opportunities throughout the day to build healthy habits and prevent dehydration in the individuals they support. Here are some tips:

- **Work hydration into routines:** Schedule drink breaks into existing routines, so hydration becomes a habit. For example, have a glass of water when the individual comes home from work or school. Or, have a drink when transitioning from one activity to another.
- **It doesn't have to be water:** Drinking water is best, but almost any fluid can help with hydration. Coffee, tea, juice, popsicles, and smoothies, for example, all help people stay hydrated. Even some fruits and vegetables, like oranges, melons, pineapples, cucumbers, zucchini, and celery, help hydrate.
- **Be creative:** DSPs are in the best position to know what might make an individual more likely to stop and take a drink. Maybe they prefer something sweet or fizzy instead of water. A certain cup or bottle may help. If the individual does not have swallowing difficulties, you can try a straw (those with problems swallowing shouldn't use straws as they can cause aspiration). Work with them to figure out what they like and what makes them most comfortable.
- **Keep track:** The individuals you support may not be able to track their own fluid intake. As their DSP, you can monitor what, how much, and when they drink. You can do this with a pen and a paper chart or by using technology like a smart phone app.
- **Consider barriers like trouble swallowing:** Difficulty swallowing thin liquids is not uncommon among people with I/DD. If you think this may be an issue for an individual you support, talk to the nurse or other healthcare provider about adding a thickener to their drinks. Thicker liquids are easier to swallow and help prevent aspiration, another fatal five condition.
- **Set a good example:** If an individual sees you take regular hydration breaks, it may encourage them to do the same. Taking drink breaks together can turn hydration into an important part of their routine and maybe even something they look forward to.

When these conditions occur, sensory differences or communication challenges can make it difficult for a person with I/DD to understand that something is wrong and talk about their symptoms. Because DSPs spend so much time with the individuals in their care, they are often the first to recognize that something is off, which means interventions can start early. They can also work with individuals on healthy habits that help prevent these conditions from happening.