

Script – Print – How much water is too much?

When it's hot outside, people tend to reach for the water. But too much of a good thing can be a problem.

It's called water intoxication and it's making news. Recently, a young woman died from drinking too much water in a short amount of time, and a young boy was hospitalized after doing the same thing.

"Water intoxication comes from drinking too much water," says Elizabeth Clay, a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare. "And it can lead to some severe symptoms. You can get a headache, disorientation, confusion, nausea, vomiting – it can even be fatal."

Other serious symptoms include muscle weakness, increased blood pressure and double vision.

"The amount of water that a person should consume is going to be individualized," says Clay. "But overall, your kidneys can only handle so much. And that's between 0.8 and one liter. So, you really don't want to be taking in more than that per hour in water."

Water intoxication can affect anyone. But it's a problem that is especially common in people who participate in sporting events, military training or working outside.

"Dehydration can play a major role in water intoxication because when a person feels that they're getting dehydrated, they may try to overcompensate and may drink too much water at one time, and your body can't handle that," says Clay. "So, you'll start to get these symptoms whether it's nausea, vomiting, confusion – just disruption of your brain activity – and that comes from that depletion of sodium. And so, your cells inside your brain are holding on to that water and it causes swelling inside your brain and that can lead to some serious complications."

Clay suggests taking frequent swallows throughout the day rather than chugging a bottle of water at once. Also, eat a healthy diet to get the needed electrolytes. And don't drink just water. Sports drinks like Powerade and Gatorade, as well as coconut water and cow's milk are full of electrolytes.

There are no guidelines as to how much water a person needs each day. Some people still follow the 8x8 rule, which recommends drinking eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day. Still, it depends on certain factors like body weight, the amount of physical activity you get and the climate where you live.

"So, if you can, stay indoors and out of the sun during this hot weather," says Clay. "But if you must be outside – if you've got training or some sort of physical activity that maybe your job or work requires – just want to make sure that you're getting those electrolytes and that water that you need. Just don't overdo it."

If you begin to experience symptoms after drinking too much water, call 9-1-1 immediately.