

Hydration

After thinking about running a marathon for years, I finally pulled the trigger at age 45. It was 1998...the first running of the San Diego Rock 'n Roll Marathon. Nervously waiting for the starting gun in the nine-minute mile section, I went over my race strategy and prayed for the best.

Concentrating on the two major pieces of advice I'd received from the experts, I took it out slowly and drank plenty of water. I was told lots of water was key to finishing the 26.2-mile run without bonking.

For years, the mantra has been drummed into endurance-sports competitors: hydrate, hydrate, hydrate. Swig water every chance you get—whether you're thirsty or not.

Maybe not! Mounting research supports very different advice. Athletes are more likely to suffer severe harm by drinking too much water during competition than by drinking too little! In extreme cases, people have died after drinking too much liquid during a race.

New studies suggest that 3% dehydration levels during competition—which experts once warned against—do not hurt performance and might actually help it. More and more, experts advocate a simple rule: During a race, drink when you're thirsty.

In his book "Waterlogged," Tim Noakes, sports medicine physician and professor at South Africa's University of Cape Town, says the body's instincts are an athlete's best friend. "If you drink to thirst, you maximize your performance," he says. Noakes blames the sports-drink industry for encouraging athletes to drink more than they need.

Ultra--marathoner Dean Karnzes says he drinks gallons of water in events such as the 135-mile run across sizzling Death Valley. In last years, New York Marathon, however, temperatures were in the mid 40's. He says he drank only once; a half cup of water at the 15-mile mark.

There's a popular water aerobics class at the pool where I lap swim. I've observed class members frequently stopping to chug from their water bottles. We've been so inculcated with the message that we have to hydrate--even in a 45-minute gentle exercise class--people force themselves to drink.

I know. We've all heard the stories of dehydrated athletes needing intravenous fluids after a long race. That's why the notion that more water is better than less still persists.

But after feeling sick and bloated following my second marathon, I have to wonder—should I have backed off on the water and Gatorade? One woman I know

felt sick at the 18-mile mark of her marathon and later became delirious. She was hospitalized and diagnosed with hyponatremia. Her excessive fluid intake caused dangerously low sodium levels in her blood.

This, of course, isn't the final word on water. But, until I hear more, listening to my body is probably the best bet.

(If you're training for the "Rock 'n Roll" in June? Good for you...and best of luck!)

Rock on!!!