If you are considering a supplement, it can be very difficult to decide which sports drink, gel, or bar would be best for you. In this, the first of a three part series, we will review sport drinks and what to look for when choosing one.

Sports Drinks
Sports drinks are more appropriate than water when athletes participate in activities that last longer than one hour. These drinks not only replace the water that is lost through sweat, but also the carbohydrates that supplement the body’s glycogen stores. In addition, sports drinks help replenish sodium and electrolytes lost during physical activity.

When selecting a sports drink to drink during activity, athletes should look for one that contains a carbohydrate concentration between 4 – 8% (1). This concentration best facilitates gastric emptying and absorption through the intestines. To determine what the concentration is in your favorite drink, divide the number of grams of carbohydrate in an 8 ounce serving by 240 and then multiply by 100 to get the percent. Keep in mind that more concentrated sports drinks are better used after activity to replenish hydration and nutrient needs.

In addition to hydration and carbohydrates, sports drinks also supply the athlete’s body with much needed sodium and potassium. These electrolytes are important because they may promote fluid retention, prevent hyponatremia (low blood sodium), muscle cramps, and may also promote increased taste and thus intake. Look for a drink that has:

- at least 100 mg per 8 ounces of sodium
- 30 mg per 8 ounces of potassium (2).

New to the market are so called “energy drinks”. Many of these contain caffeine and/or carbonation and should be avoided during physical activity. These drinks may cause upset stomach or an increased rate of fluid loss.

To decide what drink would be best for you, look on the nutrition label of your favorite drink. Be sure to try out your new drink during practice, and not during a game or competition... practice during practice.

Selected References

About the Author
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