

## Does My Athlete Need Hydration Supplements?

You may have noticed electrolyte drinks and drink mixes popping up on social media, in articles, on podcasts, and in grocery stores in recent years. But does a young athlete really need to supplement their hydration with electrolytes?

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Kristen Ziesmer, a registered dietitian and board-certified specialist in sports dietetics, explains what exactly these supplements are providing, if they're necessary, and what natural alternatives exist.

### What are hydration supplements?

The hydration supplements that are currently popular are low-to-no calorie electrolyte tablets and powders. The [common electrolytes found in these drinks include sodium, potassium, magnesium, and chloride](#). Electrolytes are required to help your body maintain fluid balance. They are necessary—but are also found in most foods, and likely don't need to be supplemented.

### Electrolyte tablets are supplements

It's important to remember that even though these hydration tablets may seem innocuous, they still fall into the supplement category and that means they aren't subject to the same [regulations as foods](#). Supplements are [regulated post-market](#), so no regulatory body reviews the contents before they reach consumers and that increases the chance of both intentional and unintentional contamination. If the supplement isn't certified as [NSF Certified for Sport](#), it may contain substances not listed on the label, substances in different quantities than identified, and substances that are prohibited in sport, says Ziesmer. "People often don't realize that even things like electrolyte tablets or sports drink mixes can fall into the supplement category," she says. A food-first approach to fueling is safer than supplements, and especially when it comes to electrolyte-infused drinks, it's easy to get the same nutrients through real food.

### Electrolyte tablets are expensive

Unfortunately, these tablets also come at a high cost, often nearly a dollar a tablet or packet, depending on the brand. "I strongly urge families to stop spending so much money on these fancy hydration supplements," says Ziesmer. "They're prohibitively expensive and they can truly be replaced by adding a bit of salt to water."

### Electrolyte tablets are not necessary for young athletes

Ultimately, while these electrolyte tablets and mixes may give water a fun flavor, they aren't necessary for performance, says Ziesmer. And they're certainly not necessary outside of practice or competition, since a standard diet will typically provide plenty of sodium, potassium, and magnesium. Often, these packets or tablets of electrolytes primarily contain high amounts of sodium, which is inexpensive and easy to add to any meal just by sprinkling a bit more salt on your food.

That being said, there are some situations where electrolyte products can be helpful, especially if you have a picky eater who doesn't get enough sodium through food or a very heavy or salty sweater.

## **Electrolyte drinks should not replace other sports drinks**

You may have seen low-or-no calorie electrolyte drinks and assumed that they would be healthier due to their low sugar content. However, [those carbohydrates from sugar are actually necessary for athletes to perform](#)! “You can make your own homemade sports drink by [diluting fruit juice with water and adding a pinch of salt and a bit of granulated sugar](#),” says Ziesmer. “But you do need carbohydrates in addition to electrolytes, especially if you’re training for more than 45 minutes or you’re going to be sweating a lot.”

## **Replacing electrolyte supplements with food**

Fortunately, there are two very simple ways to ensure your athlete is getting enough electrolytes in their diet: Add a pinch of salt in their water bottle or pack a salty snack. [“I like putting a pinch of salt and a splash of fruit juice in a water bottle,”](#) says Ziesmer. This gives your athlete the sodium they need, plus a fun flavor and a small amount of simple carbohydrates, which speeds the transport of sodium through the body. “If your athlete is already [eating salty snacks like pretzels](#) or chips, or any processed food, they’re likely getting plenty of sodium,” she adds. “You don’t need to add additional sodium on top of that.” Athletes can also get sodium from many sauces and condiments, such as soy sauce, BBQ sauce, and hot sauce.

## **Takeaway**

While your athlete may benefit from sports drinks that contain electrolytes and calories from simple carbohydrates during practice, they likely don’t need expensive electrolyte beverages or mixes outside of sport. A pinch of salt added to a water bottle is going to be just as effective while saving money and avoiding any issues of contamination in supplements.



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