

1:4 DEHYDRATION:

Water is a basic nutrient to the human body and is critical to human life' Howard and Bartram (2003)

Dehydration occurs when the normal water content of the body is reduced; upsetting the delicate balance of minerals (salts and sugar) in the body's fluid. It is defined as a loss of 1% or more of body weight as a result of fluid loss NHS Choices (2011)

Causes of Dehydration

Although fluid balance can usually be maintained under normal circumstances, there are many reasons why patients may be vulnerable to dehydration;

- Cognitive impairment
- Changes in functional ability
- swallowing difficulties associated with a number of medical conditions such as stroke, Parkinson's disease, oral and pharyngeal cancer.
- Medication such as laxatives, diuretics or hypnotics
- Illness/ infections/ pyrexia
- Respiratory illness
- Cardiac conditions
- Acute diarrhoea
- Specific conditions/ factors which result in increased fluid losses e.g. burns, increased gut loss, surgical drains.
- being nil by mouth before, during and after surgical procedures
- Endocrine disorders e.g. diabetes
- Non functioning gut e.g. post operative bowel
- Poorly presented/ unappealing fluids at tepid temperatures
- Environmental e.g. ward temperature/ hot weather/ lack of ventilation
- Fluid restriction due to a mental health condition (e.g. eating disorder or delusional beliefs)

Consequences of Dehydration

Evidence from the National Patient Safety Agency's (NPSA) National Reporting and Learning System (NRLS) has identified dehydration as a patient safety issue

RCN (2007)

These conditions can either be the cause or the effect of dehydration.

- Stroke
- Pressure ulcers
- Constipation
- Urinary infections and incontinence

- Renal disease
- Gallstones
- Heart disease
- Low blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Cognitive impairment e.g. delirium
- Respiratory infection
- Dysphagia (swallowing difficulties)
- falls
- Medication toxicity
- Loss of muscle function
- Hypo/hyperthermia

Each problem can vary and more than one of these problems can affect an individual at the same time. Physical factors, usually associated with illness, are the predominant cause of malnutrition and dehydration in UK adults, although psychosocial issues, such as bereavement, or preoccupation with diet can have significant effects on dietary and fluid intake in some groups/situations.

As malnutrition and dehydration can be both a cause and effect of disease, it can lead to a downward spiral in ill-health. Healthcare workers have a duty to provide optimal nutritional care to all patients. This section has given information on malnutrition and dehydration and highlighted key roles of individual staff groups. The following sections in this manual will provide staff with further knowledge to enable them to practice good nutritional care