

## 6 Things to Know About Electrolytes for Youth Athletes

Deciding when to use a sports drink, electrolyte-infused water, or plain water is important to your athlete's performance, but it can also be confusing. Luckily, TrueSport Expert Kristen Ziesmer, a registered dietitian and board-certified specialist in sports dietetics, has six simple tips about when and how to help your child incorporate electrolytes.

### 1. What your athlete needs will vary

Essentially, electrolytes are what controls your heart beating and your muscles contracting, Ziesmer explains. "If your athlete is just chugging water, they will eventually flush out their system, especially if they're sweating out the electrolytes at the same time. Athletes need to be taking electrolytes back in so that their muscles can contract. Without a balance of electrolytes, the body just can't perform its normal functions."

For young athletes, there are two primary determinants for deciding on water or a sports drink that contains electrolytes, says Ziesmer. First, consider practice duration. If they are training for more than an hour, even if it's mostly easy, they will still want some electrolytes to replace those lost through sweat. Second, consider the temperature outside. Is your athlete in hot weather where they'll be working up a sweat? If yes, they need electrolytes, though if the practice isn't hard or long, they may not need added calories with those electrolytes.

### 2. Electrolytes can come in many forms

According to Ziesmer, there are three primary options when it comes to ensuring that your child has the electrolytes they need to perform at their best. A sports drink is the most common option and it will also contain sugar. The second option is electrolytes that are added to plain water, which may range from tablets that contain a range of electrolytes like sodium, magnesium, and potassium to a simple pinch of sea salt for just sodium. The final alternative is having your athlete drink plain water and eat foods that contain electrolytes, like a salty pretzel.

Your choice should depend on what kind of activity your athlete is taking part in, and how easy it will be for them to snack on a pretzel versus sip a sports drink. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that, when possible, plain water combined with regular foods like pretzels is the best option for young athletes, but it will depend on what's easy for your athlete to ingest during practice.

### 3. Focus on sodium

Technically, there are several different critical electrolytes, including magnesium and potassium, but Ziesmer says that for young athletes who eat a balanced, healthy diet, the primary one to focus on during play is sodium. "For an adult, you would aim for around 500 milligrams per hour," she says. "But for a child, I would recommend starting with around 250 milligrams per hour, which is about 20 mini pretzels." This isn't a lot of salt, and she cautions that it is easy to go overboard, so be judicious in how much you add to water or how much you water down a pre-made sports drink to reach that level.

### 4. Check the label

If you're new to the world of sports drinks, start being label-conscious and checking ingredients before grabbing what's on the shelf at the local convenience store. Sports drinks will typically contain both carbohydrates and electrolytes.

Also, be sure to steer clear of energy drinks that are packed with caffeine and other ‘energy enhancing’ substances, and keep in mind that the American Academy of Pediatrics advises against children consuming energy drinks. Watch out for products that promise ‘instant energy,’ as well as electrolyte drinks that are packed with fake sugars like sorbitol, which can cause gut distress.

### **5. You can make your own**

If you prefer to keep your athlete’s diet as natural as possible, you can simply add a bit of flavor-enhancement and natural sugar (like a splash of grape, orange, or apple juice) to regular water, along with a few shakes of salt. The fruit juice makes the water more palatable, while the sugar also helps your athlete better absorb and utilize the sodium, explains Ziesmer. Add some ice to your child’s water bottle on hot days as well: Studies have shown that young athletes cool down better with cold water than with room temperature.

Ziesmer’s favorite recipe is simple:

- 3.5 cups water
- 1/2 cup orange juice
- 2.5 tablespoons of honey
- 1/4 teaspoon of salt

### **6. It’s not just about the game or practice**

Don’t let sports drinks take the place of drinking water most of the time, says Ziesmer. Letting your child guzzle sports drinks regularly sends a message that supplements and ultra-processed foods are the best option for performance, she warns.

Research has also shown that excessive amounts of sugar — found in most sports drinks — contributes to obesity, tooth decay, and even hyperactivity. Ultimately, a sports drink is only healthy when it’s in the context of a sweaty sporting event, not a casual afternoon at home.

### **Takeaway**

Hydrating properly, which often means deciding what athletes should drink, is critical to their performance and wellbeing during sport. These tips will help you decide when and what athletes should be consuming to stay hydrated.