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Oral Rehydration Therapy

Every parent knows that diarrhea is one of the commonest ailments of childhood. It affects hundreds of millions of children around the world an average of three times a year. And especially in areas where water and sanitation are poor, it can be a problem for adults also.

But children are most vulnerable to the problems caused by diarrhea, especially children who are poorly nourished and in poor health to start with. UNICEF and the World Health Organization estimate that more than three million children in developing countries die each year from serious bouts of diarrhea--the most important single cause of death and malnutrition among young children.

DEHYDRATION--A LIFE-THREATENING CONDITION

Most of the children who die from diarrhea die because their bodies have become dehydrated. That is, they have lost more fluid than they have taken in. As body fluids are lost, essential salts, minerals, and other nutrients are also lost and the body is no longer able to function properly. Severe dehydration may cause rapid weak pulse; fever; fast, deep breathing; or convulsions. Untreated, it is fatal.

The diarrhea that causes the dehydration can and should be treated before the problem becomes so serious. The idea is to give the child (or adult) as much fluid as possible and to restore the balance of salts and other nutrients. The treatment is called oral rehydration therapy (ORT). It works almost as fast as an intravenous (IV) feeding and is safer, simpler, and cheaper. Any mother can treat her child at home for just a few cents, versus the high cost of an IV or other medications. WHO estimates that use of ORT saved over 200,000 lives in 1984.

Use of ORT is so effective that as of January 1988 some 90 countries around the world had national programs to promote its use and it is becoming the treatment of choice in many hospitals in industrialized countries. Many organizations have programs to teach medical workers as well as parents about the treatment and to train them in its use.

TREATING OR PREVENTING DEHYDRATION

A mixture--called rehydration salts--of salt, sugar, sodium, potassium (and perhaps other nutrients), and water is fed to the child frequently throughout the day and night. The salt-sugar mix is usually available in packets or tablets to be mixed with clean water. In some places, the bottled mixture may also be available. If the salt-sugar mixture is not available, you can make your own rehydration drink at home (see box).

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**REHYDRATION DRINK
TO PREVENT AND TREAT DEHYDRATION**

In 1 liter of **WATER** (better if boiled, but do not lose time)

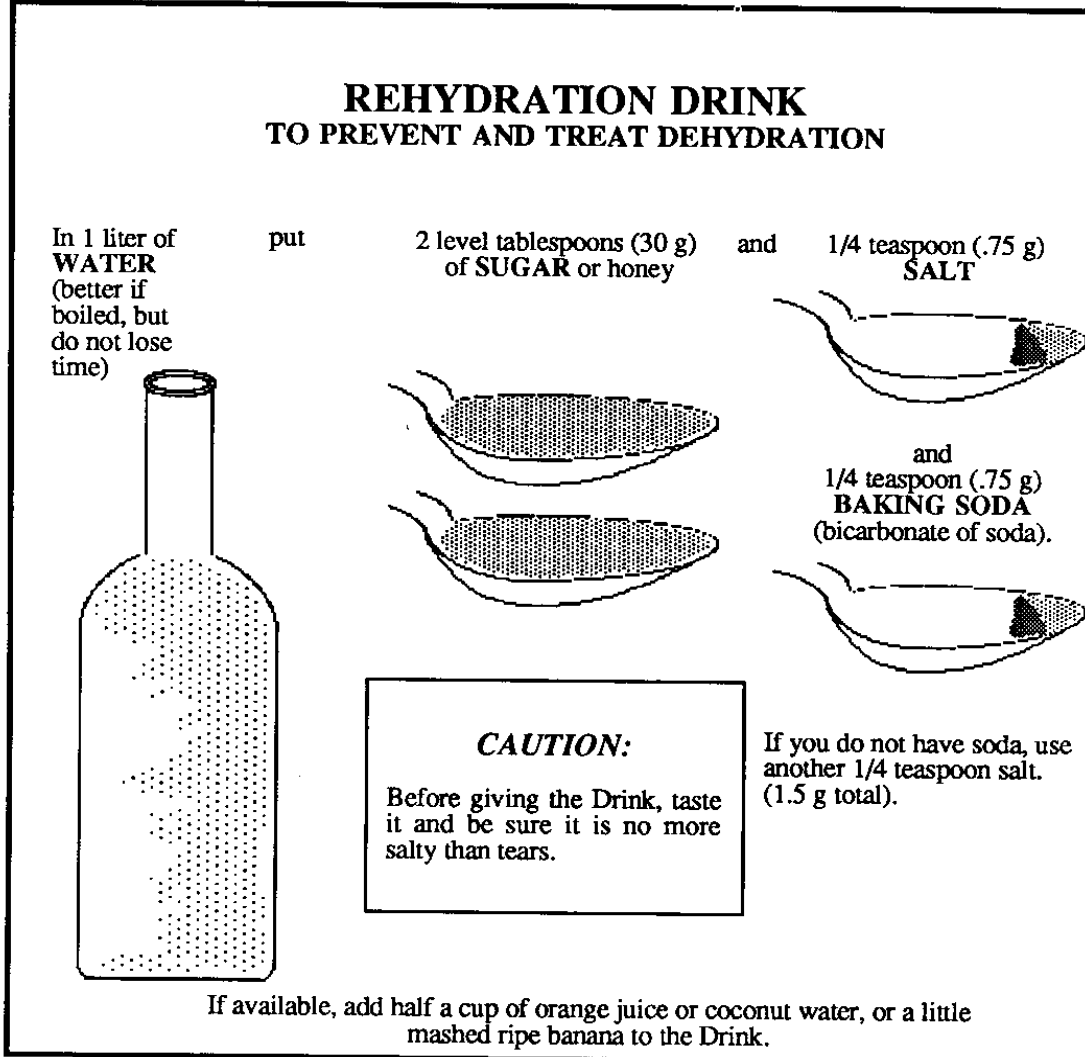
put 2 level tablespoons (30 g) of **SUGAR** or honey and 1/4 teaspoon (.75 g) **SALT**

and 1/4 teaspoon (.75 g) **BAKING SODA** (bicarbonate of soda).

CAUTION:
Before giving the Drink, taste it and be sure it is no more salty than tears.

If you do not have soda, use another 1/4 teaspoon salt. (1.5 g total).

If available, add half a cup of orange juice or coconut water, or a little mashed ripe banana to the Drink.



Mix up the drink at the first signs of diarrhea. Give the person sips of the drink every few minutes, day and night, that they are awake--even if they don't feel like drinking it and even if they vomit. An adult should drink three or more liters a day and a small child should have at least one liter a day or one glass for each watery stool.

Diarrhea is often caused by malnutrition, but if it goes on long enough the diarrhea itself contributes to the malnutrition. Be sure that the person who has diarrhea eats good, easily digestible food along with the rehydration drink. This is

especially important for children, but anyone who is thin and weak should get plenty of protein and energy foods all the time that they have diarrhea. If they are too sick to eat much, they should take broth, porridge, rice water, and/or cooked and mashed beans or fruit, in addition to the rehydration drink. Babies should continue to be fed breast milk. As soon as they can, the sick persons should begin eating well again.

(It should be noted that doctors often have different ideas about how to treat people with diarrhea, especially regarding the types and quantities of food the

sick person should eat. Many doctors feel that people with diarrhea should not eat anything but thin soups or cereals. Other doctors say that the sick person should be allowed to eat almost any good healthful food they feel like eating. You should be prepared to follow the advice of your doctor or health worker.)

Unless the diarrhea is caused by some other disease, such as amoebic dysentery, the person should respond quickly to the treatment. If the diarrhea gets worse, or if there are other disease symptoms such as fever, and the person seems to be dehydrating, get help from a doctor or health worker immediately. Remember that children are affected more quickly than adults, and dehydration is very dangerous for babies.

Look for these signs of dehydration:

- o dry, tearless, sunken eyes
- o sudden weight loss
- o dry skin, mouth, and tongue
- o sudden weight loss
- o sunken "soft spot" on a baby's head
- o little or no urine, and what there is is dark yellow

Dehydration also causes the skin to lose its elasticity. a pinch of skin does not fall back to normal, but stays up in a lump. Dehydration may also cause rapid, deep breathing; a fast but weak pulse; fever; and/or convulsions.

Source:

Werner, David. Where There Is No Doctor. Palo Alto, California: Hesperian Foundation, 1980. First published in Spanish as Donde No Hay Doctor. Now available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Swahili. Available through VITA in English, Spanish, and French.

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