

Sports Drinks vs. Water

RBR 2/04/10

What's the matter? You are so tempted to fill your bottles only with water instead of a sports drink. Water doesn't leave sticky liquid sugar on your pristine bike, and it doesn't drip colored streaks down the front of your jersey when you're breathing so hard you miss your mouth. Water is a lot cheaper, too -- or free by holding your bottle under a tap.

But despite the inconvenience, price and mess, sports drinks have advantages that water can't match. How can you force yourself to forego the H₂O?

Here's help: If you need convincing, remember these 3 things:

---**Carbs mean better performance.** Sports drinks contain carbohydrate while water does not. You need to ingest carbs on rides longer than about 90 minutes to help replace the muscle fuel (glycogen) that's being burned. Getting this replacement carbohydrate is easier with fluids than by eating solid food.

---**Electrolytes help you ride better.** Sports drinks contain various electrolytes depending on the manufacturer, but sodium is the most important because you lose so much of it through perspiration. Drinking only water on long and hot rides can even lead to the serious medical condition called [hyponatremia](#). Basically, your body's electrolytes become so diluted that cells swell, and when this happens in the brain it can be fatal.

---**There's still room for water.** On long rides you can drink water along with sports drink, although the percentage should lean heavily toward the latter for reasons just cited. Drinking both water and a sports drink tends to dilute the drink's optimal carbohydrate concentration and might delay stomach emptying.

You could use nothing but sweet drinks, of course, but most riders find that the taste eventually becomes cloying and they like to "chase" a couple of swigs of sports drink with water.

Importantly, food usually tastes better with water than with sports drinks. Most riders do well on a diet of one energy bar per hour on a long ride, but washing down a peanut- or chocolate-flavored bar with a fruit-flavored sweet drink can be both unappetizing and tough on the stomach.