



AUSTRALIAN DENTAL  
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# The Cost of Sports Drinks

## Read the label

There's no doubt about it, sport and exercise are a fantastic way to keep fit and healthy and enjoy yourself, and it's understandable that you might be inclined to supplement your efforts with sports drinks and gym supplements – but at what cost?

The acidity and sugar in these beverages, especially when consumed over long periods of time or out of habit, can cause 'tooth erosion' and 'decay', which often lead to irreversible damage and the need for otherwise avoidable dental treatment. In limited situations there may be a place for sports drinks, but for the majority of Australians it's best to save your money and preserve your oral health.

### The reasons you drink sports drinks

If you think about why you last bought a sports drink, it was probably because they taste good, because you wanted 'electrolytes' for fast hydration, or because you thought it might give you a performance boost in sport or exercise.

Before condemning sports drinks it's important to note that the ADA considers occasional consumption to be OK. Most things are OK in moderation! It's when you form a habit of drinking certain beverages that damage your teeth that you'll have a problem.

Sports drink manufacturers know this is the case, so they spend millions of dollars promoting their 'benefits', often using sporting celebrities in their advertising or sponsoring sports teams to suggest an increase in performance for anyone who drinks their products.

The reality is many of these products are causing your teeth to erode without doing much to improve performance, hydration, or health.

### Keeping hydrated

If you go to the gym, play a team sport, run, or do anything else that is active, you need to keep hydrated. Dehydration has a terrible impact on performance. You might think, "I don't get dehydrated", but next time you exercise, think; "Is my mouth dry? Do I have an acidic taste in my mouth? Am I sweating a lot?" If the answer to any of these questions is yes, you are probably already dehydrated and your performance is suffering for it.

The easiest way to stay hydrated is to drink tap water before, during, and after exercise. It has the added benefit of being good for your teeth, unlike sports drinks that bathe your teeth in harmful sugar or acids. Water is free from a tap and cheaper than sports drinks from a bottle. The ADA recommends tap water which contains fluoride that helps protect your teeth in the long term.

### Reading the label

Manufacturers of foods and beverages are very smart about how they provide nutritional information; often giving the impression they are healthy when they are not. A quick glance at a label will let you know if the products you are consuming contain sugar or acid. Sugar can be masqueraded as a 'healthy' ingredient, such as honey, rice syrup, or even 'organic dehydrated cane juice', and whilst these may sound wholesome they are still sugar and will still cause decay if consumed frequently.

*Hint: the words 'syrup', 'sweetener', and anything ending in 'ose' (like glucose or fructose) can be assumed to be 'sugar'.*

Many sport enhancing supplements include ingredients such as citric acid to help to create a flavour and ingredients such as 'sodium benzoate' as a preservative so the products have a longer shelf-life. These ingredients increase acidity and therefore increase the potential for dental erosion.

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*As a rule of thumb sport enhancing products that contain ingredients like citric acid (food numbers 330 or 331) or ascorbic acid (food number 300) are acidic! Preservatives that end in the letters 'ate' like sorbate can also be assumed to be acidic!*

### Gym Supplements

Don't panic, not all gym supplements are bad for your teeth. The real danger is how frequently some of them are consumed, especially if they contain sugar or acids.

The worst of the bunch are pre-workout drinks that often contain lots of sugar, caffeine, and acid. This is closely followed by 'intra-workout drinks' like those that offer Branch Chain Amino Acids (BCAAs) that are designed for sipping during your workout, and are very acidic. Both of these products are damaging to your teeth and should be removed from your supplement plan.

Protein and Creatine are usually OK, just check the nutritional table and make sure the sugar content is as close to zero as possible. Remember, drinking water before, during, and after your sessions is the best way to keep hydrated.

### TIPS AT A GLANCE

Avoid swishing sports drinks and intra-workout drinks around in your mouth.

Using a straw helps reduce damage from harmful beverages, as does drinking them cold.

Use water to keep hydrated, preferably tap water.

Discuss your training and nutrition regime with your dentist. A regular dental review will detect early damage and offer preventive advice.

If you're not sure whether you need to be using specialised sports products when you exercise, make an appointment with an Accredited Sports Dietitian to find out more.



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