

# Dehydration tests don't work for older people

**Kat Lay**, Health Correspondent

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**Dehydration can lead to confusion, low blood pressure and falls in older people** GETTY IMAGES

Tests to identify dehydration are not effective for older people living in care homes and should be withdrawn from use, a study has found.

Carers are taught to look at older people's eyes and skin, as well as asking them whether they feel thirsty, tired or have a headache. However, researchers from the University of East Anglia found that such tests failed to identify dehydration accurately in those aged over 65 compared with the "gold standard" blood tests.

Lee Hooper, from UEA's Norwich Medical School, who led the research, said: "Low-intake dehydration happens when people don't drink enough fluids to stay healthy and is very common in older people."

In 2010 Norma Spear, who was 71, went into a care home temporarily while her house was being refurbished but died less than six weeks later. An inquest in 2013 found that she had been neglected and was dehydrated. Dehydration can lead to confusion, low blood pressure and falls in older people.

Dr Hooper said that her team wanted to investigate whether the standard tests worked on older people living in care homes. The team looked at 188 women and men in care homes in Norfolk and Suffolk, who were given the standard dehydration assessment and blood tests to check for present or impending dehydration.

They found that 20 per cent of residents were dehydrated and a further 28 per cent had impending dehydration. None of the tests used by carers was able to distinguish those patients from those who had adequate fluid intake, the team concluded.

Diane Bunn, from UEA's School of Health Sciences, who was the co-lead author, said: "We found that none of [the simple tests] were able to accurately identify people with dehydration, and we recommend that they are withdrawn from practice. While blood tests are the most accurate way of telling if someone is dehydrated, this is expensive and not easily done in care homes unless a doctor orders the test. We really need an inexpensive easy-to-do test for dehydration in older people."

The study is published today in the *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association*.

Caroline Abrahams, the charity director of Age UK, said: "We need to ensure that staff are trained to help older people drink enough, and be able to recognise and act on the warning signs of dehydration."

## Comments

### Jeff L

Wouldn't 'borderline' dehydration be more appropriate than the term 'impending' dehydration? Unless dehydration is effectively inevitable and unavoidable at the 'impending' stage. More detail needed I suppose.

R

## **ConcernedCitizen**

Inadequate fluid intake is usually not down to neglect. Older people often have a low thirst drive and will sit with a full drink in front of them and refuse to drink it or show no interest in it whatsoever. There is only so much carers can do as you cannot force people to drink. You can set up subcutaneous fluid delivery in the form of a butterfly and a bag of iv fluid, but that is invasive and needs a qualified nurse to set it up and monitor it. A lack of interest in fluids and food in older or very sick people is a natural process and occurs as the body winds down towards the end of life.

The body finds it difficult to process food and fluid by this stage and it can increase the burden on the circulatory and digestive systems if people are artificially made to take on fluid and nutrition. In the drive to keep people going as long as possible, natural process need to be thwarted and the staff responsible for these individuals are blamed for being unable to do so. Is this really fair?

## **S Frodsham**

So how do you detect dehydration in the elderly without a blood test?

R

## **BBDavies**

S Frodsham

Look at the urine. Dark yellow & they are probably dehydrated.

R

## **Mike Jones**

BBDavies

Sorry that has been proven to be an unreliable method as well

## **Edenvale**

S Frodsham

Look up "boater dehydration chart" and you'll find several useful charts.

## **Coochi Rodwell**

The prime reason for dehydration in the elderly, is they refuse to drink because they are unable or don't want to keep getting up to go to the toilet. You can make and get h them fresh drinks every half an hour, and you will find a large majority will only take a sip of two from each drink and leave the rest. It's well known in the healthcare industry it doesn't needs further investigation.

## **Dixie Hughes**

Coochi Rodwell

Exactly; and the next stage is a UTI, and so the cycle continues... Constant encouragement; making the drinks rather more interesting than plain water etc is the only answer...