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The Forgotten Summer Lifesaver: Time to Reposition Oral Rehydration Solution



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Every year, Pakistan faces frequent heat waves, especially in early summer, i.e., May and June. As soon as another scorching summer arrives, advices such as drink more water, stay indoors, avoid the midday sun, are heard everywhere. However, there is one simple and remarkably effective solution that is rarely a part of the conversation: Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS).

For decades, people have been using ORS exclusively as a treatment for diarrhea [1]. This routine in healthcare and public practices has overshadowed its potential role in curing other forms of dehydration. As heatwaves become frequent and more severe, our approach to preventing dehydration also needs to evolve. So, it is the right time that we should stop treating ORS just as a remedy for diarrhea, and start recognizing its importance for managing heat-related dehydration [2].

When human beings are exposed to high temperatures for long periods of time, the body loses both water and essential electrolytes, i.e., Sodium, Chloride, potassium, etc., through sweating. In such situations, which involve substantial fluid and electrolyte loss, replacing water alone may not fully restore the body's hydration status. ORS has a carefully balanced combination of glucose and electrolytes that facilitates efficient absorption of water and sodium in the intestine [2]. This makes it one of the most effective and affordable rehydration therapies ever developed. Public health campaigns always encourage people to drink more water, but they hardly ever explain that replacing lost electrolytes is equally important.

In Pakistan, each year, there is an increased number of patients who suffer from dehydration, heat exhaustion, and other heat-related illnesses reported in hospitals. Since our public is not aware enough, people who experience excessive sweating, do outdoor work for long durations, engage in strenuous physical activity, or feel early signs of dehydration end up consuming sugar-sweetened beverages or commercial sports drinks, assuming that they provide equivalent benefits, although their composition is quite different.

The message is not that everyone should replace water with ORS during the summer. For most healthy people, water remains the best choice for everyday hydration. Instead, ORS should be recognized as a valuable option for people who have lost significant amounts of fluids and electrolytes because of prolonged heat exposure, excessive sweating, or other conditions that increase the risk of dehydration.

As climate change continues to increase heatwaves, it has become a public health priority to prepare communities for extreme heat [3]. Raising awareness about when ORS should be used, making it readily available in communities, and including it in heat-health action plans are the simplest and most affordable steps that could help reduce preventable cases of dehydration and heat-related illness.

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