Dehydration occurs when people lose more water than they take in. And it only takes minor fluid loss to create major health issues. Studies show that just a two-percent drop in body water can cause fuzzy memory, trouble with basic math, and problems focusing on a computer screen or printed page. If severe enough, dehydration can lead to confusion, weakness, infections, pneumonia, urinary tract infections, or even death.

For the elderly, dehydration is common for a number of reasons: seniors have a reduced sense of thirst so it’s easy to forget to drink enough, some medications have a diuretic effect, some may cause patients to sweat more, frail seniors have a harder time getting up to get a drink when they’re thirsty, and as we age our bodies lose kidney function and are less able to conserve fluid. Illnesses, especially those that induce vomiting and/or diarrhea, can also cause dehydration.

Not surprisingly, dehydration is one of the most prevalent reasons for hospitalization among people over 65. And sadly, about half of those hospitalized die within a year. The most common signs of dehydration are fatigue, muscle weakness or cramps, headaches, dizziness, nausea, confusion, rapid breathing or increased heart rate.

At Highgate, we educate our staff on the importance of consistent hydration and schedule frequent opportunities for our residents to enjoy their preferred beverages during group activities, teatime and nonalcoholic “happy hour.” We strive to create a social environment that encourages fluid intake. To help those who have difficulty drinking, we teach our staff and families the use of positioning strategies, swallowing exercises, cuing, and good oral care.

We’re also diligent about providing the right types of hydration, so our residents aren’t getting the majority of their fluids through sugary soda pops, beer, or coffee. We encourage them to drink low-sugar vitamin waters, healthy natural juices, green tea, and lots of basic, pure water.

So how much is enough? Health professionals recommend eight to 10 glasses per day, and more if it’s hot or humid, or if someone is losing fluids due to illness. Not only will this prevent dehydration, but for many people, getting enough water eases back aches and joint pain, as well. Water helps flush out toxins and re-energizes one’s entire being.

For more information about Highgate Senior Living and all the ways we help our residents stay as healthy and physically fit as possible, please contact the community nearest you.