GENERAL

world health organization oral rehydration solution recipe

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Introduction

When dehydration strikes—whether from a sudden bout of diarrhea, vomiting, fever, or excessive sweating—your body's electrolyte balance can quickly become disrupted. In many parts of the world, especially in low resource settings, this can lead to severe complications or even death, particularly among children. The World Health Organization (WHO) has long championed a simple, life saving remedy: the Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS). This article dives deep into the WHO recommended ORS recipe, explains why it works, and offers practical guidance for preparing, storing, and using it at home or in emergency situations. Whether you're a caregiver, a healthcare worker, or simply curious about a staple of global public health, read on to learn how this humble mixture can make a world of difference.

What Is an Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS)?

ORS is a precisely balanced blend of water, sugars, and electrolytes—primarily sodium and potassium—that helps your body absorb fluids and replenish lost salts. Unlike plain water or sugary drinks, the proportions in ORS are carefully calibrated to maximize absorption while minimizing the risk of over hydration or electrolyte imbalance. The solution's design is rooted in the same principles that guide intravenous therapy, but it can be administered orally, making it accessible and affordable in virtually any setting.

Key Components of WHO ORS

- Sodium chloride (salt) – Essential for maintaining blood pressure and fluid balance.
- Sugar (glucose) – Drives sodium absorption in the small intestine, boosting fluid uptake.
- Potassium chloride – Replaces potassium lost through diarrhea or vomiting.
- Trisodium citrate or sodium bicarbonate – Helps neutralize stomach acid and prevent metabolic acidosis.
- Clean water – The vehicle that carries all the ingredients.

Why ORS Is a Global Health Game Changer

Before the advent of ORS, dehydration was treated mainly with intravenous fluids—an approach that requires trained personnel, sterile equipment, and a reliable power supply. ORS, by contrast, offers a low cost, low technology solution that can be administered by anyone, anywhere. The WHO estimates that ORS has saved more lives than any other medical intervention since its introduction in the 1960s, reducing mortality from diarrhea in children under five by up to 50% in many countries.

Scientific Rationale Behind ORS

When the gut is flooded with fluid, the presence of glucose and sodium in the lumen enhances the active transport of sodium across the intestinal lining. Water follows sodium passively via osmosis, ensuring efficient rehydration. Moreover, the inclusion of potassium prevents hypokalemia, a common complication of prolonged fluid loss. The buffering agents (trisodium citrate or sodium bicarbonate) help maintain blood pH, counteracting the metabolic acidosis that can accompany severe dehydration.

WHO Recommended ORS Recipe

Below is the WHO's standard ORS formulation, which is both simple to produce and highly effective. The recipe is designed for a 1 liter (1000 /mL) volume, but you can scale it up or down depending on your needs.

Ingredients (Per Liter)

- 1 /tsp (5 /g) of table salt (sodium chloride)
- 1 /tsp (5 /g) of potassium chloride (optional, but recommended for children)
- 1 /tbsp (15 /g) of white sugar (or an equivalent amount of glucose)
- 1 /tsp (5 /g) of trisodium citrate or sodium bicarbonate (for acid neutralization)
- 1 /liter of clean, safe drinking water

Step by Step Instructions

1. Measure the water. Start with 1 /liter of clean water. If you're unsure about the water quality, boil it for at least 5 minutes and let it cool before using.
2. Mix the dry ingredients. In a clean container, combine the salt, potassium chloride, sugar, and trisodium citrate (or sodium bicarbonate). Stir until the mixture is fully dissolved.
3. Combine. Pour the dissolved mixture into the liter of water and stir until homogeneous. The solution should have a slightly sweet, salty taste—just enough to be palatable for children.
4. Test the taste. If the solution tastes too salty or too sweet, adjust the sugar or salt slightly, but do not deviate more than 10% from the recommended amounts.
5. Store properly. Keep the ORS in a clean, covered container. Use within 24 hours if stored at room temperature, or refrigerate for up to 48 hours.

Variations and Customizations

While the WHO recipe is the gold standard, certain circumstances may call for adjustments:

- For infants under 6 /months. Use a more concentrated solution (double the sugar) and a reduced salt amount to avoid overwhelming the infant's kidneys.
- For patients with high blood pressure. Reduce the salt content by 25% and increase potassium slightly, but only under medical supervision.
- For areas with high water contamination risk. Add a small amount of chlorine bleach (1 /ml of 5% bleach per liter) to kill pathogens, then wait 30 minutes before use.

How to Prepare ORS at Home

Preparing ORS at home is straightforward, but it requires attention to hygiene and accurate measurement. Below are practical tips to ensure you create a safe, effective solution.

Tools You'll Need

- Measuring spoons (tsp and tbsp)
- Clean glass or plastic container with a lid
- Stirring utensil (spoon or stick)
- Clean water source (or a kettle for boiling)

Step by Step Home Preparation

1. Boil the water if you're uncertain about its safety. Let it cool to lukewarm before mixing.
2. Use a clean measuring spoon to add each ingredient precisely. Accuracy is key—over adding salt or sugar can be harmful.
3. Stir until all solids dissolve completely. Residual crystals may indicate incomplete mixing.
4. Label the container with the date and time of preparation.
5. Store in a cool, dry place or refrigerate if you plan to use it later.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Using table salt that contains additives (e.g., iodine, anti caking agents).
- Mixing the solution in a dirty container or with unclean utensils.
- Over concentrating the solution—this can cause hypernatremia.
- Storing the solution for too long—bacteria can grow after 24 hours at room temperature.

When to Seek Medical Help

ORS is a powerful tool, but it's not a substitute for professional medical care in all cases. Seek immediate medical attention if:

- The patient is vomiting repeatedly and cannot keep fluids down.
- Signs of severe dehydration appear—sunken eyes, dry mouth, rapid heartbeat, or faintness.
- The patient has a fever above 39°C (102.2°F) or persistent high fever.
- There is blood in the stool or vomit.
- The individual has a chronic medical condition (e.g., kidney disease, heart failure) that may complicate fluid balance.

Professional Care vs. Home Treatment

In a hospital setting, intravenous therapy may be required for severe cases. However, for mild to moderate dehydration, especially in children, ORS administered at home can be equally effective, provided it's prepared correctly and used as directed.

Alternatives to WHO ORS

While WHO ORS remains the benchmark, other formulations exist, particularly in resource limited settings or for specific populations.

Home Made Rehydration Solutions

- Use a mix of sugar, salt, and baking soda, but adjust the ratios carefully.
- Add a pinch of ground cumin or turmeric for flavor and potential anti inflammatory benefits.

Commercial ORS Packets

Many health organizations distribute pre packed ORS sachets that contain the exact proportions of salt, sugar, and electrolytes. These are especially useful in emergencies or when precise measurement is challenging.

Specialized ORS for Elderly or High Risk Patients

Some formulations reduce sodium or increase potassium to accommodate renal or cardiovascular conditions. Always consult a healthcare provider before altering the standard recipe.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is it safe to use ORS for infants?

Yes, but the concentration should be adjusted. Infants under 6 months may require a more diluted solution, and a pediatrician's guidance is recommended.

Can I use honey instead of sugar?

Honey is not recommended for infants under 12 months due to the risk of botulism. For older children, honey can be used as a sweetener, but it does not provide the same glucose sodium absorption synergy as table sugar.

What if I don’t have potassium chloride?

Potassium chloride is optional but beneficial. If unavailable, you can use a small amount of potassium rich foods (e.g., bananas, potatoes) in the diet, but the ORS will not be as balanced.

Can I add fruit juice to ORS?

Adding fruit juice can improve taste but may introduce excessive sugars or acids that disrupt the electrolyte balance. Stick to the WHO recipe for optimal results.

How long does ORS stay effective?

Prepared ORS should be used within 24 hours if stored at room temperature or within 48 hours if refrigerated. After that, bacterial growth can compromise safety.

Conclusion

The World Health Organization’s oral rehydration solution recipe is a testament to the power of simplicity in medicine. By combining just a few ingredients in precise proportions, ORS restores fluid and electrolyte balance, saves lives, and empowers individuals to manage dehydration on their own. Whether you’re preparing it for a child, a traveler, or an emergency scenario, understanding the science behind ORS, following the correct preparation steps, and recognizing when professional care is needed will help you make the most of this life saving tool. Remember: accurate measurement, clean preparation, and timely use are the keys to success. Armed with this knowledge, you can confidently provide essential hydration support whenever the need arises, turning a simple solution into a powerful safeguard for health and well being worldwide.

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