

Adults-Kids Still Consume Too Many Sugary Drinks

July 30 2020 8:00 AM



We've heard it before -- sugary drinks are contributing to the obesity epidemic. Now, a committee which reviews and updates the federal government's dietary guidelines has new suggestions that cover everything from how much juice to give to toddlers to how many drinks an adult man should consume in a day.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans—which provide nutrition recommendations and are the basis for federal food programs such as MyPlate—are updated every five years by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). An advisory committee's suggested recommendations have been released for public comment.

The report highlights that 70% of Americans are overweight or obese. Tina Canada, Coordinator for Diabetes Education at OSF HealthCare Holy Family Medical Center in Monmouth says the new recommendations highlight that sweetened beverages, not including coffee and tea, account for approximately 60% of added sugars in adult diets. That's twice the recommended amount, contributing 220-334 calories from added sugars each day.

“That's a tremendous amount of sugar. We do drink a lot of sugar beverages. Milk and 100% juice do have some nutrients but most of the other sugared beverages we drink don't have any nutrients; they don't really benefit our diet. They just add calories,” according to Canada.

The guidelines are based on evolving nutrition science and serve as the government's official advice on what to eat. The latest update concludes, “reducing the amount of added sugars in the diet, either through changes in consumer behavior or in how food is produced and sold, is an achievable objective that could improve population health.” Added sugars are used in processed foods and beverages to sweeten, and differ from the natural sugars that are part of a piece of fruit or glass of milk.

Since the last big revision, the average daily consumption of sugar went from 22 to about 18 teaspoons a day. But, Canada believes most people are still oblivious about the amount of sugar and calories in the typical convenience store Big Gulp.

“You're looking at something that's well over 500 calories so that is definitely like adding an extra meal and you don't feel like you've had any food and you didn't get any nutrition from that so you're going to eat something to add some nutrition for your body.”

The committee acknowledged beverages with low-calorie sweeteners can lead to weight loss, but research indicates the impact only moderately reduces obesity and body mass index (BMI) in children and adults. Canada says artificially sweetened drinks sometimes taste so sweet, they affect a person's palate. To match that sweetness level, she says people consume sugar laden desserts because they crave the level of sweetness they're used to experiencing. Yet others eat the high-sugar, high-calorie treat because they “gave up” sugar by drinking a diet beverage.

Other cities have tried to tax or ban sugary drinks to reduce consumption and lower obesity rates. Canada doesn't like a punitive approach. Instead, she prefers working on messages that can have a strong impact -- including how reducing sugary drinks can have a big impact on weight loss.

“If I’m a person who gives up sugared pop and I give up one, 20 ounce bottle of that a day, even if I don’t eat any differently, I don’t improve eating habits at all; add more vegetables to my diet, i don’t get any more exercise, I would lose 30.7 pounds in a year ... just from giving up one, 20 ounce Pepsi. That, I think, has an impact for people.”

Canada would like to see sugary drinks removed from vending machines in schools or at the very least, she favors so called traffic light vending machines such what’s in place at Holy Family Medical Center in Monmouth. When someone chooses a drink with added sugar, it triggers a red light indicator.

“Your regular water or flavored waters, like Propel or Vitamin Water that doesn’t have sugar added, they’re gonna be a green light. Those that are gonna be in the middle, some of the diet soft drinks are listed as a yellow light so it kind of gives you that visual reminder if you go to the vending machine that ‘hmmm, this is not really a healthy choice for me.’”

Canada, who as a diabetic educator, takes people on tours of the grocery store. She says people are sometimes surprised when they start reading labels. Once they begin seeing the amount of added sugar in food items such as energy drinks, juice and soda, they have a new appreciation for what comes out of the tap.

“We have a lot of options with water. We can get some unflavored sweeteners. You know water is always our best choice for a beverage and most of us are not getting the amount of water we need in a day to stay hydrated and to stay healthy.”

Many coffee and smoothie drinks found in retailers across the country contain high levels of added sugar so it’s best to ask ahead if the sugar amounts are not listed on the menu. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires the amount of added sugar on foods and beverages be listed on nutrition facts labels but that is not required on restaurant or coffee shop menus.

Resources

If you are concerned about your nutrition or diet, you can search for an OSF Dietician or Diabetes Educator in your area [here](#) and Canada recommends getting some tips for low-sugar beverages at our [recipes page](#).

The American Diabetes Association has a wealth of information. A website called [SugarStacks.com](#) can tell you how much sugar is in beverages and other foods and it offers some compelling visuals.

Smartphone apps such as myfitnesspal can help. For kids, she recommends Carb Counting with Lenny which uses games to help children understand the amount of carbohydrates and sugars in what they eat. She says adults can also learn from it too.