

NEW STUDY on Parents' Beliefs About Sugary Drinks

Misleading advertising and labeling help explain why many parents believe sugary drinks are healthy options for kids



Numerous scientific studies document harm from consumption of sugary drinks:

- Sugary drinks contribute few or no essential nutrients to the diet.
- Sugary drinks are the top source of added sugar in Americans' diets.
- A child's likelihood of developing obesity increases by 60 percent for every 8 oz. sugary drink consumed per day.
- Overweight status in childhood and adolescence are strong predictors of future health.
- Negative health outcomes related to added sugar consumption, including obesity and type 2 diabetes, are increasing for youth.

The study was designed to assess potential misperceptions among parents regarding the healthfulness of sugary drinks for their children, and included an online survey of an ethnically diverse, national sample of 982 parents, each with at least one 2- to 17-year-old child. Key findings:

- One-third or more of parents indicated on-package claims such as 'low-calorie', 'real/natural', 'vitamin C' and 'antioxidants' influenced their decision to purchase sugary drinks for their children.
- Among parents of children ages 2 to 5, 80 percent provided fruit drinks, such as Capri Sun or Sunny D. Forty percent provided regular soda.
- Of note, parents were more likely to rate the healthfulness of specific products differently from their drink categories. For example, while only 30 percent of parents rated fruit drinks as healthy, 43 percent rated Sunny D as healthy and 36 percent rated Capri Sun as healthy.

Conclusions

- Many parents believe sugary drinks are healthy options for their children, particularly flavored waters, fruit drinks, and sports drinks.
- Many parents rely upon on-package claims in their purchase decisions.
- Marketing messages on the packaging of many sugary drink products may imply they provide essential nutrition. For example, claims about 'natural' ingredients appear on the majority of packages for children's fruit drinks, flavored waters and sports drinks.

The new Rudd Center study, *“Parents’ beliefs about the healthfulness of sugary drink options: opportunities to address misperceptions,”* was published online March 11 in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*. It was designed to assess potential misperceptions among parents regarding the healthfulness of sugary drinks for their children. The study included an online survey of an ethnically diverse, national sample of 982 parents, each with at least one 2- to 17-year-old child, in 2011. Ninety-six percent of parents provided an average of approximately three different categories of sugary drinks for their children in the month prior to the survey, and many reported relying upon on-package claims in their purchase decisions. *“Given excessive consumption of added sugar by children in the home, there is a continuing need to address parents’ misperceptions about the healthfulness of many sugary drink products,”* the researchers concluded.



The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) funded the study. RWJF recently committed \$500 million over the next ten years to ensure that all children in the United States can grow up at a healthy weight, no matter who they are or where they live. One of the Foundation’s five strategic priorities is to eliminate the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages among children 5 years old and younger.

About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to improving the world’s diet, preventing obesity and reducing weight stigma. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public

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