The Health Consequences of Drinking Soda and Other Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

Americans drink a lot of sugar. Sugar-sweetened beverages are the primary source of added sugars in the American diet.\(^1\) From 1977 to 2001, Americans nearly tripled their daily intake of calories from sugar-sweetened beverages.\(^2\) Although consumption has declined recently,\(^3\) the average American still consumes 150 calories of sugar-sweetened beverages daily\(^4\) and 45 gallons of sugar-sweetened beverages per year.\(^4\) Every day, approximately 66% of children and 77% of adolescents consume at least one sugar-sweetened beverage,\(^5\) and 10% of teen caloric intake comes from sugary drinks.\(^3\)

Sugar-sweetened beverage consumption has been a huge contributor to the obesity epidemic. All lines of scientific evidence indicate a strong link between sugar-sweetened beverage consumption and obesity.\(^6\) From 1977 to 2001, Americans increased their daily calorie consumption by 250–300 calories; 43% of this increase was due to sugar-sweetened beverages.\(^6\) Because calories in liquid form do not trigger the same sensation of fullness as solid foods, the calories we drink add to those we eat rather than replacing them.\(^7\) Adults who drink at least one soda per day are 27% more likely to be overweight or obese, regardless of income or ethnicity.\(^8\)

Sugar-sweetened beverages are especially harmful to children. Compared to children who rarely drink sugar-sweetened beverages, children who drink at least one serving of sugar-sweetened beverages per day have 55% increased odds of being overweight or obese.\(^9\) Furthermore, children who drink sugar-sweetened beverages are more likely to be overweight or obese as adults.\(^10, 11\) In 2008, experts estimated that children would need to reduce their intake by 64 calories per day to meet the Healthy People 2020 goals for childhood obesity,\(^12\) which may be achieved by eliminating one sugar-sweetened beverage daily. Sugar-sweetened beverage consumption among youth has been linked to increased triglycerides the blood, which increases risk for cardiovascular disease.\(^13, 14\) Drinking sugar-sweetened beverages also compromises the overall quality of a young child’s diet;\(^15\) sugar-sweetened beverage consumption is associated with inadequate intake of critical nutrients like calcium, iron, and vitamin A.\(^15, 16\)

Disparities in sugar-sweetened beverage consumption. Latinos and African-Americans are more likely to consume sugar-sweetened beverages on a daily basis compared to whites.\(^5\) This disparity is influenced by a lack of grocery stores, a high prevalence of convenience stores, and the low cost of sugar-sweetened beverages compared to healthier beverages in many predominantly Latino and African American communities,\(^10, 19\) along with a long history of soda marketing that targets these communities.\(^20\)

*NOTE: Sugar-sweetened beverages refers to all beverages with added sugars including carbonated soft drinks, juice drinks, sports drinks, flavored and enhanced waters, sweetened teas and energy drinks.*
Sugar-sweetened beverage consumption increases the risk for both diabetes and heart disease. Compared to non-drinkers, individuals who drink 1–2 sugar-sweetened beverages per day have a 26% higher risk for developing type 2 diabetes and a 20% higher risk of developing metabolic syndrome. Women who drink more than 2 servings daily have a 35% higher risk of heart disease. High levels of fat in the blood, liver, and abdominal region, which increase one’s risk for heart disease and diabetes, can develop after very short periods of high sugar-sweetened beverage consumption. After only 2 weeks, young men and women who drink 3 cans of soda daily show a 20% increase in levels of bad cholesterol and triglycerides in the blood. After 6 months, men and women consuming 3 sodas daily display increased cholesterol, visceral fat, and fatty liver.

Sugar-sweetened beverages damage teeth. Soda consumption nearly doubles the risk of dental caries in children, and increases the likelihood of cavities in adults. The acid in soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages causes erosion of tooth enamel, often after just one sip, and the sugar in these beverages provide fuel for bacteria that cause tooth decay.

Diet Beverages. Although diet beverages can provide calorie savings if substituted for high-calorie sweetened beverages, they are not recommended because they often have high acid content that can harm teeth and there is some evidence that their sweet taste can stimulate overeating. For children, they displace milk and other healthier options.

REFERENCES