

# FDA should work to cut sugar levels in sodas, experts say

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Petition by leading consumer advocate group and academics urges artificial sweeteners be used instead.

(HealthDay)—A leading consumer advocacy group, along with nutrition experts and health agencies from a number of U.S. cities, are calling for lowering the amount of sugars added to soft drinks.

Led by the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), the group on Wednesday sent a petition to the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#) asking the agency to determine safe levels of high-fructose [corn syrup](#) and other sugars in sodas and assorted soft drinks.

Currently, the average 20-ounce bottle of soda contains about 16 teaspoons of sugars made from high-fructose corn syrup, the CSPI said. The [American Heart Association](#) currently recommends that men consume no more than 9 teaspoons of added sugars daily, and women no more than 6 teaspoons' worth.

Some 14 million Americans of all ages now get more than one-third of their calories from added sugars, the petition stated.

"The consumption of such high amounts of sugar and high-fructose corn syrup [in sodas] are causing serious health problems, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, among others," said CSPI Executive Director Michael Jacobson.

There's been a great deal of scientific evidence gathered over the past decade to support that link to health problems, he said, and "we're contending that much of the evidence centers around beverages." The CSPI believes most sugary [sodas](#) could be safely replaced by those made with low-calorie sweeteners.

The group said its petition has the support of public health departments in Baltimore; Boston; Los Angeles; Philadelphia; Seattle; Portland, Ore.; and other cities, as well as leading academics at Harvard and Yale universities and other institutions around the country.

According to Jacobson, the FDA is legally bound to examine the health effects of the amount of sugar being consumed and take corrective action.

The center is first asking the FDA to determine the safe level of sugar in drinks. Also, it wants the FDA to issue targets for the [sugar content](#) of other sugary foods and urge industry to voluntarily reduce sugar levels in those foods, Jacobson said.

"The third thing is to educate consumers to choose healthier foods and beverages," he said.

The FDA classifies high-fructose corn syrup, sucrose and other sugars as "generally recognized as safe," Jacobson said.

"What we're asking the FDA to do is to modify those regulations and set some limits in beverages," he said.

In the 1980s, the FDA twice committed to looking at limiting sugar levels in foods if new scientific evidence found sugar levels were harmful to the public, or if sugar consumption rose, Jacobson said.

"We are reminding the FDA of that and saying you have an obligation to revisit this and protect the public's health," he said.

It will take years before any action is taken, but that gives industry time to adjust to using less sugar in drinks, Jacobson said.

Jacobson said economic issues shouldn't be part of the FDA's consideration. "There are winners and losers for any kind of a regulation. The sugar industry and the corn industry [which supplies ingredients for high-fructose corn syrup] would be losers, but the soft drink industry might be winners," he said.

The makers of no-calorie sweeteners "would probably make out like bandits," Jacobson said.

The CSPI hopes new sweeteners—such as rebiana, made from the stevia plant— will replace high-calorie sugar, making drinks healthier.

Although some people are concerned that these sweeteners may be harmful, Jacobson said they are still a better option than sugar.

"The FDA considers all these sweeteners perfectly safe," Jacobson said. "We think the certain harm that's coming from the 16 teaspoons of sugar in a 20-ounce bottle of soda greatly outweighs the speculative risk from artificial sweeteners," he added.

"We have an obesity epidemic on our hands, with two-thirds of Americans obese or overweight, and that should take precedence over smaller concerns," Jacobson said.

The sugar industry took issue with the new petition.

"As we continue to debate the root causes of our nation's obesity issue, we need to rely on science and facts, not look for quick fixes that draw focus away from developing real solutions to a complex problem," said J. Patrick Mohan, the interim president of the Corn Refiners Association, which represents high-fructose corn syrup manufacturers.

And the American Beverage Association, which represents soft drink makers, said its industry is already making changes.

"Today about 45 percent of all non-alcoholic beverages purchased have zero calories and the overall average number of calories per beverage serving is down 23 percent since 1998," the ABA said in a statement issued Wednesday. And according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Americans are consuming 37 percent fewer calories from sugar in [soft drinks](#) and other sweetened beverages than in 2000," the group added.

"Everyone has a role to play in reducing obesity levels—a fact completely ignored in this petition," the ABA said. "This is why the beverage industry has worked to increase options and information for consumers."

Dr. David Katz, director of Yale University's Prevention Research Center, said he joined the CSPI effort and is "proud to have signed the petition."

"The evidence that an excess of added dietary sugar, in any of its many

guises, is a major contributor to the prevailing public health ills of our time is now essentially incontrovertible," he said. "It stands to reason that lowering those levels will help in efforts to reduce the levels of obesity, diabetes and other chronic disease."

Soda and other sugary drinks are the single biggest source of calories in the U.S. diet, with Americans, on average, consuming between 18 and 23 teaspoons—about 300 to 400 calories—of added sugars each day, according to the petition.

Many teens and young adults consume even more sugar than the average. Some get at least 25 percent of their calories from added [sugar](#), according to the 2007-2008 U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

The CSPI petition notes that cities around the country have taken note of the problem and have acted. In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg is capping restaurant soda serving sizes at 16 ounces—a move that has met with considerable resistance from some who believe it tramples individuals' rights.

**More information:** For more on obesity, visit the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#).

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