

Children's consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages

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A recent study published in *Pediatrics* and led by researchers at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health found that sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are an increasingly large part of children and teens' diets. Teens who consume SSBs, which include sodas, fruit drinks and punches, and sports drinks, drink an average of 356 calories per day, a significant increase from 10 years earlier. The findings suggest that reducing empty caloric intake by limiting these drinks may be a key strategy for promoting healthy eating and preventing excess weight gain.

Comparing data from two time periods, 1988-1994 and 1999-2004, the study showed that over-consumption of sugary beverages is widespread, with 84 percent of teens consuming SSBs on a typical day. An adolescent male who consumes the average amount of SSBs per day (356 calories) would need to jog for an hour or walk for more than three hours to burn off these excess calories.

The study also showed that the number of SSB calories consumed by children ages two to five and six to 11 increased from the previous decade. In particular, the study shows that children ages six to 11 consumed 20 percent more calories from sugar-sweetened beverages in 1999-2004 compared with the 1988 to 1994 period. The study also noted a more rapid increase in SSB calorie consumption among Black and Mexican American youth.

Growing evidence indicates that sugar-sweetened beverage consumption in children and teens may be contributing to rising obesity rates in the United States. A 2006 *Pediatrics* study published by the same authors indicates that there is an energy gap contributing to the obesity epidemic. This energy gap—or the imbalance between the calories children take in each day and the calories they expend to support normal growth, physical activity, and body function—is about 110-165 excess calories per day. The latest *Pediatrics* study on sugar-sweetened beverages supports limiting

intake of calories from sugary beverages to promote optimal energy balance.

"These findings highlight an alarming trend in sugary beverage consumption and should be a major concern for parents and policy-makers worried about the childhood obesity epidemic," says Y. Claire Wang, MD, ScD, assistant professor of Health Policy and Management at the Mailman School of Public Health, and lead author of the study. "Mounting evidence suggests that the excessive consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages not only contributes to obesity but also promotes energy imbalance, further supporting the potential benefit of limiting these drinks."

Not surprisingly, the most common sugar-sweetened beverage was soda (55 percent of sugar-sweetened beverage calories), followed by a wide variety of fruit punches and fruit drinks. Together these accounted for 92 percent of sugar-sweetened beverages consumed by children and youth. The fastest growing category was sports drinks, increasing threefold among adolescents during the study period.

"Parents can be easily misled by the labels on fruit punch and sports drink bottles because they make these sugar-sweetened beverages seem essential for good health, when in fact they are nothing more than different forms of sugar water," notes Steven Gortmaker, PhD, professor of the Practice of Health Sociology at the Harvard School of Public Health and co-author on the study. Sara Bleich PhD, assistant professor of Health Policy and Management at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, is also a co-author on the study.

The study also shows that children are consuming these beverages in a variety of locations—homes, schools, fast food establishments, and other restaurants. Most of the sugar-sweetened beverage consumption (55 to 70 percent) occurs in the home environment, whereas 7 to 15 percent of

consumption occurs in schools.

"The findings confirm that children are not getting all the beverages from just one place," Dr. Wang points out. "The amount of 'empty calories' that children and adolescents consume each day is very disconcerting. Parents, school administrators, policy-makers and leaders in the restaurant and beverage industry can all play an important role in reducing sugar-sweetened beverage consumption."

Source: Columbia University

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