



A Hard Look at Soft Drinks

Written by Jill Grunewald and published in mix magazine, August 2010



It's hot, we're thirsty, and many Americans' impulse is to reach for a soda or soft drink. For lots of folks, nothing compares to the fizzy, ice cold, über sweet drink that we've been savoring for over 100 years. In past decades, soft drinks were touted as a tonic. Bubbling water was equated with vigor and wellbeing, and if it was good enough to bathe in, why not drink it? Just add some flavoring and you've got a bona fide health beverage.

I would argue if soft drinks were ever a health tonic to begin with and undoubtedly, the evolution and radically increased consumption of these beverages has done a real number on our health. Still, the industry has witnessed incessant growth, even weathering health movements and economic downturns, and continues to adapt to our ever-changing tastes.

Liquid Candy

While statistics on beverage consumption vary considerably, it's inarguable that Americans consume vastly more soft drinks than any other country. It's no coincidence that we also suffer from the highest rates of obesity, heart disease, and Type II diabetes, all to which excessive sugar intake contributes.

According to a 2007 American Journal of Public Health report, "Yearly U.S. per capita consumption of non-diet soft drinks rose 86% between 1970 and 1997 alone (22 gal vs. 41 gal). The prevalence of obesity increased 112% during that approximate time." Today, says Dr. Joseph Mercola, we're downing approximately 57 gallons per person per year, which means some are guzzling over a gallon a week. When you consider that this doesn't include most diabetics and small children, the volume is actually higher. The Lancet medical journal recently published a report stating, "One extra soft drink a day will give a child a 60 percent greater chance of becoming obese."

Each 12-ounce can of non-diet soda contains a whopping 10 to 12 teaspoons of sweetener, usually in the form of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). The dangers of HFCS are becoming very widely held; we've got the Food and Drug Administration over our right shoulder telling us that, while not "natural," it's safe, and we have a horde of independent studies and concerned health practitioners over our left shoulder telling us otherwise.

High fructose corn syrup (also disguised under the name crystalline fructose) is a relatively recent invention of our food industry and is a certain indicator of low quality foods. It's ubiquitous; if you begin reading labels on conventional foods, you'll see that it's in everything: condiments, ice cream, juices, jams, soups, syrups, yogurt, cereals, even bread. It's cheap, has a long shelf life, and therefore food companies love the stuff. But the body doesn't know how to metabolize this type of fructose and many a study is linking HFCS to obesity, diabetes, and disrupted metabolic and liver function.

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



Liquid Poison

Most diet soft drinks are sweetened with NutraSweet (aspartame) or Splenda (sucralose). Despite many studies and testimonials to the contrary, the creators of these FDA-approved chemical sweeteners are scrambling to convince the public that they are safe. These faux sweeteners do nothing to curb the obesity epidemic and are, through different mechanisms, clearly linked to obesity.

We've been conditioned to believe that "sugar free" is healthier, but if the replacement is a chemical additive, we've been duped. Yes, sucralose is made from sugar, but what they don't want you to know is that chemists add three chlorine molecules to the product. Sucralose has been linked to decreased red blood cell count, enlarged kidneys and liver, significant shrinkage of the thymus gland, and degeneration of lymph follicles.

If this weren't bad enough, aspartame may be worse. According to Dr. Mercola, "Results of multiple studies, complaints, and testimonies have revealed that aspartame can trigger or worsen the following diseases: brain tumors, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, chronic fatigue syndrome, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, mental retardation, lymphoma, birth defects, fibromyalgia, and diabetes." These chemical sweeteners are a wolf in sheep's clothing and in my opinion, should be banned. You're better off with good ol' sugar.

A Different Kind of Drinking Problem

There are further issues surrounding soda consumption that aren't often discussed but certainly deserve attention. The high acid content of soft drinks can be very harmful to our teeth and bones. According to the Missouri Dental Association's Stop the Pop campaign, "The pH of regular and diet soda ranges from 2.47 to 3.35, which is quite acidic." (The lower the number, the higher the acidity.) To put these figures in perspective, the pH of water is 7.0, vinegar ranges from 2.55 to 3.18, and battery acid is 1.0.

The fact that sodas contain all of this sugar and acidity as well as caffeine and phosphorus is what makes the fizzy stuff bad for our bones, as caffeine and phosphorus reportedly inhibit calcium absorption. Whether you continue to drink sodas or swear them off after reading this article, it's a good idea to take a calcium supplement with magnesium and vitamin D. These additional nutrients are what help us absorb the calcium into our bones. (Find a supplement where the magnesium content is half that of the calcium.)

If all of this weren't enough, certain sodas contain benzene, a known carcinogen by the FDA. Cigarette smoke, forest fires, and burning oil and coal can contain benzene and it can form in beverages that contain sodium benzoate or potassium benzoate combined with ascorbic acid (vitamin C), especially when subjected to heat and light. You never know whether your soda sat in a blistering hot truck as it made its way to your local convenience store and benzene is a highly toxic compound that has been known to cause Parkinson's disease, liver cirrhosis, DNA damage, and to significantly accelerate aging. I truly believe soft drinks to be one of the most harmful things we can put in our bodies.

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



A Different Buzz

Speaking of caffeine, many people have a difficult time kicking the soda habit not just because it's an answer to a raging sweet tooth, but also because of the caffeine-induced turbo charge. And the two together – look out. But sugar and caffeine aren't true energy-givers and I challenge you to stop and ask yourself what else you can do to rev your fire when you need a spark in your get-along. Go for a brisk walk? Drink some green tea? Do thirty jumping jacks? Drink two glasses of water?

I'll be the first to admit that I enjoy a sweet bubbly on occasion and it's easy to satisfy this craving by mixing plain sparkling water and fruit juice. And luckily, there are options at your local co-op that, if consumed in moderation, won't leave you depleted. Below are some very tasty and fun alternatives to the brown (and neon yellow) stuff, which, I still recommend in moderation due to the sugar content.

Be prepared, as some of the flavors will really knock your socks off!

Local sodas, all sweetened with natural cane sugar:

- Buddy's Soda Pop, New Ulm, MN - buddyssodas.com
- Spring Grove Soda, Spring Grove, MN - springgrovesoda.com
- Stevens Point Brewery, Stevens Point, WI – pointbrew.com

Sweetened with real fruit juice:

- The Switch - switchbev.com
- R.W. Knudsen - knudsenjuices.com

Sweetened with stevia:

- Zevia – zevia.com

Sweetened with natural cane sugar:

- Goose Island Natural Craft Sodas - gooseisland.com
- GuS - drinkgus.com
- Santa Cruz Organic - scojuice.com

* * *