

What you should know about SOFT DRINKS

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Got a two-can-a-day habit? You're not alone. Carbonated soft drinks account for more than 28 percent of beverage consumption in the United States, according to the National Beverage Association. And this has more than doubled over the past 20 years. Certainly, nobody should mistake soda for a health drink, but is it really all that bad? Here's the latest on soft drinks and your health.

What's in it?

Soft drinks consist mainly of water, carbon dioxide (which creates the fizz), flavoring, artificial coloring, caffeine (except caffeine-free varieties), acidulants (such as phosphoric acid, citric acid, malic acid or tartaric acid), preservatives, potassium and sodium, and, of course, sweeteners.

A 12-ounce can of regular soda contains about 150 calories and between 40 and 50 grams of sugar (in the form of high fructose corn syrup or sucrose), **equivalent to about 10 to 12 teaspoons**. In diet sodas, artificial sweeteners such as aspartame, sucralose, acesulfame K and saccharin take the place of corn syrup, but otherwise the ingredients of both the regular and diet versions are the same.

What are the issues?

Obesity: Many health experts blame the increase in non-diet soda consumption in large part for high obesity rates in the United States and the health problems associated with it, such as type 2 diabetes. With each can of regular soda providing about 150 calories, **if you drank one can a day without cutting back on other calories, you could gain about 15 pounds a year**. If you're trying to lose or control your weight, the National Institutes of Health recommends you quench your thirst with water, sparkling soda with a splash of fruit juice or an occasional diet soda.

Artificial sweeteners: The Food and Drug Administration has given its stamp of approval for safety to acesulfame K, aspartame, saccharin and sucralose (Splenda). According to the FDA there are no known health risks associated with moderate consumption (one or two 12-ounce servings a day). The only exception is for people with a rare genetic condition called phenylketonuria, who cannot consume aspartame. However, **recent studies show that long-term consumption of artificial sweeteners can blunt our normal sugar taste receptors, leading us to crave more foods with real sugar later**.

Tooth decay: Don't think your teeth are safe because you stick to diet soda. The acid in all varieties of soda (regular, diet, cola and non-cola) is **even more damaging to teeth than sugar**. Acid wears away and weakens tooth enamel, which in turn can lead to cavities and other forms of tooth decay. In fact, a study in the January/February 2005 issue of *General Dentistry* found that non-cola soft drinks, energy/sports drinks and commercial lemonade "showed the most aggressive dissolution effect on dental enamel." To minimize the damaging effects, try not to sip these types of drinks for long periods of time and **rinse your mouth with water or brush your teeth afterwards**.

Caffeine dependency: Many soft drinks, including both colas and non-colas, contain caffeine. Caffeine can be **addictive and acts as a stimulant, which can cause insomnia, irritability and a racing heartbeat in some people**. If you have problems with caffeine and are trying to cut back, wean yourself off slowly to lessen withdrawal symptoms and avoid products that boast extra caffeine.

Weak bones: Some studies suggest that **excess consumption of phosphoric acid, an ingredient in all soft drinks, can deplete the bones of calcium by preventing the nutrient from being absorbed**. This is a special concern for post-menopausal women prone to osteoporosis. A contributing factor may also be that heavy soda drinkers simply don't drink enough healthy beverages, like milk, which can lead to low calcium levels.

Nutrition deficiency: Diet soft drinks may be a better substitute for regular soda in terms of avoiding added sugar and calories, but **the simple fact is soda is not healthy**. If you regularly choose soda over more nutritional beverages such as water, milk, 100-percent juice or even in place of a healthy snack, you **may not be getting enough essential nutrients**.

The bottom line

As usual, the key is **moderation**. **Limit yourself to no more than one or two cans (a maximum of 24 ounces) of soda a day, and make sure they don't replace more nutritious foods and beverages in your diet**. As long as soft drinks are not your main source of fluids and you're otherwise following a well-balanced, healthy diet, a daily fix of fizz is OK.