

Study Finds Soft Drink Consumption Up, Health Down

It has been called “liquid candy” by nutritionists, “liquid gold” by insiders to the beverage industry. Carbonated soft drinks have topped the beverage sales charts in the United States for over half a century. Although both nicknames for soda are appropriate, the first is perhaps a little more fitting: One 8-ounce serving of soda provides a whopping 7 teaspoons of sugar. That amounts to one fifth the recommended daily maximum sugar consumption for teenage boys and nearly one third that for teen girls!

Now, new findings released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture suggest that the amount of sugar in carbonated soft drinks plays a back seat to an even larger problem. That problem is teens’ rapidly shrinking taste for any beverage *other than* soda. In particular, soda consumption has begun to replace teens’ use of milk and water.

Got Milk?

The USDA report reveals a sharp decline in milk consumption among teens. During the late 1970s, teens between the ages of 12 and 19 were reported as drinking nearly twice as much milk as soda. By the turn of the 21st century, those numbers had practically flip-flopped. Teens were drinking approximately 40 percent less milk, while consuming nearly twice as much soda.

Getting enough calcium through milk is critical during adolescence since the body’s ability to store calcium dwindles with age. According to William Evers, nutrition professor at Purdue University, the best any person can do after age 25 “is to decrease the rate at which calcium leaves their bones, no matter how much milk they drink or calcium they consume.” People, and especially females, who do not stockpile calcium when they are young, are at increased risk of osteoporosis. This is a disease that makes the bone brittle and more susceptible to breaking.

Calcium isn’t the only nutrient sacrificed when soft drinks are chosen in place of milk, notes Edith Hogan, a dietitian at the American Dietetic Association. People who make soda their beverage of choice miss out on other nutrients in milk. Among these are protein, vitamin A, riboflavin, vitamin B₁₂, phosphorus, magnesium, and zinc. Milk has been called the almost-perfect food because of its health-giving benefits.

Cool, Clear Water

Teens are also choosing soft drinks over water, an essential nutrient for life. Water plays a role in every vital body function. It helps carry nutrients to and waste away from your cells. It lubricates your joints and allows you to swallow and digest foods. Health experts advise drinking 8 cups of water per day.

Members of the soft drink industry would hasten to point out that their product is mostly made up of water. While this is true, the processing of carbonated soft drinks often compromises a good deal of the fluorine and other important chemicals contained in plain water.

The best way to get the water your body needs is by drinking pure, clean water. Bottled waters are fine, too -- as long as you read the label and make sure that the product’s added flavorings do not include sugar, as is sometimes the case. Finally, many natural foods, such as fruits and milk, are made up of mostly water.