

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Health

Healthy drinks are as important as healthy foods for kids, panel says

Experts recommend that children and teens drink mostly water and plain pasteurized milk.

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By Erin Blakemore

Children and teens should drink water, plain pasteurized cow's milk and limited amounts of 100 percent fruit and vegetable juices, according to healthy beverage guidelines recently released by an expert panel.

In a consensus statement, the panel recommended limiting plant-based milk alternatives, flavored milk, caffeine and beverages sweetened with both sugar and nonsugar sweeteners.

The panel, which included experts from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Heart Association, was convened by Healthy Eating Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Over a five-month period, the panel members reviewed extensive scientific literature and drafted the recommendations, which apply to youths ages 5 to 18.

Water should be the “primary beverage for meeting hydration needs,” they write, with children drinking between 16 and 88 ounces per day depending on age and sex. Tap water is preferred, the panel writes, noting that it is “usually readily available, convenient, affordable, and environmentally friendly; in many places, it is also fluoridated.” Bottled water should be consumed only where tap water is unsafe, they write.

Plain pasteurized milk provides essential nutrients, the panel writes, with fat-free or low-fat options the gold standard. While 100 percent fruit and vegetable juice may be safely consumed, they write, consumption should be limited because of the associated higher caloric intake.

Plant-based milk alternatives do not have the nutritional content of dairy foods and should replace dairy only if medically indicated, the panel recommends, adding that flavored and sweetened milk should be avoided or limited.

Both sugar-sweetened beverages and those that get their sweetness from nonsugar alternatives “are not recommended as part of a healthy diet for children and adolescents,” the panel concludes, citing the health consequences of consuming added sugars and emerging evidence linking nonsugar sweeteners to health problems in adults. The panel also recommends avoiding caffeine- or stimulant-containing beverages, which can affect cardiovascular health, sleep and mental health in children and adolescents.

“Choosing healthy beverages for children is just as important as choosing healthy foods,” Amy Reed, a pediatric dietitian and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics’ spokeswoman, said in a news release. The panel also calls for more research on beverages’ effects on children and adolescents.

