

Thirsty? Try a Refreshing Alternatives to Soda

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Americans' obsession with soda is waning, but not everyone is sipping with their health in mind.

According to a study published in November 2017 in *Obesity*, about 61 percent of children and 50 percent of adults reported drinking soda daily in a 2013–2014 survey, compared with nearly 80 percent and 62 percent, respectively, in a 2003–2004 survey. Overall, 18,600 children age 2 to 19 and 27,652 adults 20 years old and older were surveyed over the total time period.

Drinking soda can be a detriment to human health. **According to a study published in September 2019 in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, drinking soda is associated with a higher risk of heart disease, stroke, colorectal cancer, and all causes of death.**

It's also linked to obesity, notes a review published in August 2017 in *QJM*, the journal of the Association of Physicians of Great Britain and Ireland. Findings from a study published in the journal *Appetite* suggested that drinking soda can trigger sweet cravings by dulling your sensitivity to sweet tastes, sparking a vicious cycle of eating foods and drinks with added sugar.

"Soda has no nutritional value, and therefore, there is no nutritional benefit to having it," says Kelly Kennedy, RD, staff nutritionist for Everyday Health. "Just one can of cola contains over 9 teaspoons of sugar — that's 1½ times more than the American Heart Association recommends a woman have in an entire day."

All of that added sugar intake has damaging effects. **A study published in 2015 in the journal *Diabetologia* found that swapping out just one sugary drink a day for coffee, tea, or water may reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes by as much as 25 percent.**

Diet soda fiends aren't off the hook either. "While diet soda does not contain added sugar or empty calories, as regular soda does, there is some evidence to suggest that it isn't much better — if at all — than regular soda," Kennedy says. A study published in March 2015 in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* found that diet soda intake is directly related to abdominal obesity in adults over age 65. The increase in waist circumference among diet soda drinkers was three times the amount that it was in nondrinkers.

Earlier research suggests that the artificial sweeteners in diet soda may change how the brain's reward system processes sweetness.

"While you're not getting the same amount of calories or sugar from a diet soda that you would from a regular one, the belief is that with diet soda the body senses the sweet flavor and craves the calories that would normally go with that flavor," notes Kennedy. "As a result, people end up making up for the missed calories in other foods that they eat throughout the day."

In Kennedy's opinion, other unhealthy lifestyle factors "often go along with frequent soda consumption, which compounds soda's effect on health," she says. "Oftentimes, when someone is having a soda, they're not making the best food choices either."

So what are some better choices? There are plenty of other refreshing beverages, with nutritional value, that you can drink instead of soda. It's still important, though, to consider what's in your soda substitutes. Replacing soda with high-sugar fruit juices or processed tea and coffee drinks, which often contain added sugar, isn't much better for your health.

But swapping out soda for drinks that are low in sugar, such as unsweetened iced coffee or tea, can reduce your sugar intake while adding beneficial antioxidants to your diet, notes research. Low-fat milk, Kennedy adds, is also a better option, providing vitamins and nutrients, such as calcium, per the University of California in San Francisco.

Need some inspiration?

Infuse Your Water With Delicious Flavor

Flavored waters are everywhere these days, but many contain sugar or artificial sweeteners. A healthier choice is natural flavoring: Just add slices of your favorite fruits, veggies, and herbs — try lemons, oranges, watermelon, cucumber, mint, or limes — to a pitcher of ice-cold water for a refreshing and flavorful drink. Another great option is to put chopped-up fruit in an ice cube tray, add water, and freeze. Place these colorful fruit cubes in your beverage for instant flavor and color!

Go Natural With Green Tea, Hot or Iced

A review of green tea research reveals that it may help reduce the risk of several types of cancer, heart disease, obesity, liver disease, and type 2 diabetes. In addition to this, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) notes that green tea is calorie-free (if you have it without milk or sugar) and naturally high in antioxidants, according to a review. Green tea is available in many varieties. Drink it hot or iced, and if you want a little sweetening, a few drops of honey will serve you well.

Take Your Water Sparkling for That Bubbly Feeling

Plain, old-fashioned H₂O is the healthiest substitute for soda, "but sometimes, people have a tough time making the switch directly from drinking soda to water," Kennedy says. One way to smooth this transition: Sip seltzer. You'll get the hydration of water with the feel of carbonation from soda, Kennedy says, and there are no downsides in terms of health.

You may have noticed that CBD sparkling water is having a moment. One brand, Recess, has infused sparkling water with hemp extract, ginseng, and L-theanine (an amino acid that may boost mental alertness, according to research) to bring the drinker calm and focus. As to whether it's worth buying, that decision is ultimately up to you, Kennedy says. "CBD has yet to be approved by the [Food and Drug Administration], and while there is some evidence that CBD may help with conditions like anxiety and chronic pain, there simply have not been enough studies to recommend it for either of these."

Add Juice to Seltzer and You've Got 'Jeltzer'

There's no need to purchase sugary sodas or pricey, so-called vitamin-enhanced waters — which also pack calories — when instead you can mix 100 percent no-sugar-added juice with seltzer. A thick, tart

juice, such as pomegranate or grape, makes for a great "jeltzer" base, in addition to supplying potential health benefits. Mix one part juice with three parts seltzer to create this light and bubbly concoction.

Pomegranate juice and grape juice are sources of antioxidants that may help protect your brain and blood vessels. A small study published in Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine found that pomegranate juice helped improve older adults' mild memory problems. That said, Pom Wonderful, the maker of a popular pomegranate juice, funded one of the study author's educational grants, which may have indirectly affected the study results. Also, this study included only 32 people and lasted four weeks long, so more research is needed.

Grape juice, meanwhile, may help protect the heart, according to an article published in December 2015 in Nutrients. Scientists don't know the type of grape and the specific dose of grape juice that offers cardiovascular benefits, but authors of the current study noted that the perks of flavonoids — disease-fighting compounds found in plants including grapes — could be seen in just ½ to 1 cup of Concord grape juice.

Regardless of the juice you drink, you don't want to go overboard with this beverage. After all, whole fruit trumps juice when it comes to health benefits. "It's a common misconception that juice is good for you because it's made from fruit," notes Kennedy. While it does have nutritional benefits that soda lacks, it can also be high in sugar and calories. Plus, fruit juice lacks the filling fiber that fruit offers, notes the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Fake a Lemon-Lime Soda to Satisfy Your Citrus Fix

Can't give up your favorite citrus-flavored soda? Indulge in an occasional treat with a healthier version made with lemon or lime and a small amount of sweetener. Start with a glass of sparkling or seltzer water and add a few slices of lemon or lime (or both) and a dash of stevia-based sweetener, which is calorie-free and low in carbohydrates. A little goes a long way, so use it sparingly.