

NUTRITION (TOPICS/NUTRITION) | FROM THE JANUARY 2012 ISSUE (ISSUE/JANUARY-2012)

Pop Risk



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Drinking too many sodas and sugary beverages contributes to teenage obesity rates. PATRICK LLEWELYN-DAVIES/OJO IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Soda, pop, soft drink... no matter what you call it, that sweet, syrupy, bubbly concoction is a tasty and tempting beverage. It's so tempting that a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/>) (CDC) found that almost one quarter of high school students drink at least one soda each day.

Unfortunately, consumption of soda and other sugary drinks has increased—along with teens' waistlines. The CDC estimates that 17 percent of kids ages 2 through 19 are obese. "Obesity rates for both kids and adults have been going up the past several decades," says Susan Babey, a research scientist at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research (<http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/Pages/home.aspx>) in Los Angeles.

Dietary Disconnect

The average 20-ounce bottle of soda has 240 calories and 67 grams, or 14 teaspoons, of sugar. That's more than what the U.S. Department of Agriculture (<http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome>) recommends teens should consume each day, which is no more than 10 teaspoons of added sugar. What's the problem with all that extra sugar? First, it's bad for your teeth. Sugar feeds the bacteria that cause tooth decay and cavities.

Although sugar does provide calories to energize your body, those found in soda are considered empty calories because they provide no additional nutritional benefits. "Soda and sugary drinks are a huge source of added sugar, so they're really something that should be consumed in limited quantities," says Nancy Brener, a research scientist at the CDC. "They should not be part of a regular diet."

Although the sugar-and-caffeine buzz feels good at the time, sugary drinks usually don't fill you up, causing you to consume even more calories throughout the day. "People are much more likely to control the overall number of calories they're consuming if it's in a solid form," says Babey. "If you add a beverage on top of solid food, it's extra calories, but people don't eat less to accommodate the 200 extra calories in their meal." These liquid calories add up and rack on the pounds.

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and pack on the pounds.

Obese Teens

Over time, obesity can cause problems all over your body. Carrying that excess weight strains your heart and bones. Adult ailments like heart disease and high blood pressure are now being diagnosed in teens. Obese teenagers have 13 times higher lifetime risk of having a stroke, a debilitating event where the blood supply to part of the brain is interrupted or severely reduced.

Organs like your pancreas, liver, kidneys, and gallbladder can suffer too. An obese person may also develop apnea, a disease that disrupts breathing during sleep. Obesity can take a toll on your mental health as well and can lead to depression.

Diabetes Risk

Guzzling all the extra sugar in soda also raises your risk of developing type 2 diabetes, another disease linked to obesity. Diabetes affects how a person's body uses sugar. The pancreas is an organ that produces insulin, a chemical that helps break sugar down into glucose, which cells use for energy. In type 2 diabetes, your body becomes less able to metabolize, or break down, sugars in your bloodstream. "So regardless of the amount of insulin the pancreas produces, the body no longer responds to it, and that's when you have type 2 diabetes," says Stephen Pont, medical director of the Texas Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Obesity (http://www.delchildrens.net/services_and_programs/texas_center_for_the_prevention_and_treatment_of_childhood_obesity/). Type 2 diabetes is the second-most-common disease in children and teens.

Treat Yourself

It's best to save soda and other sugary drinks for special occasions. That's what Nicole Wirzburger, 15, does. Although her high school in Lexington, South Carolina, has vending machines full of soda, Nicole chooses to drink water and uses the school's water fountains to refill her water bottle throughout the day. "I tend to drink soda only at parties or out at restaurants," she says.

"There's only a certain amount of beverages that you can consume in a day, and you don't really want soda and sugary drinks to displace the other beverages of better nutritional value," says Brener. Her advice: Stick to water.

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