

More Dangerous Than Smoking? Death by Soda

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We are a country of overweight people. Americans are tipping the scales in record numbers, with approximately 130 million who are presently considered overweight or obese. Perhaps most alarmingly of all, half of all women aged 20 to 39 in the United States are included in these figures. Many factors contribute to the growing problem, from our sedentary lifestyles to our overindulgence in high-energy, low nutritional foods. Dealing with the crisis is not easy. The marketing of energy dense foods is a multi-billion dollar industry, and manufacturers of such products go to great lengths to ensure their shareholders continue to profit from the sales of nutrition-less foods.

Despite the barrage of marketing to the contrary, sales pitches, and misinformation, consumption of soda has been directly linked to both obesity as well as type 2 diabetes. Soft drinks are packed full of sugar and refined carbohydrates, both of which are undeniably correlated to these factors. Type 2 diabetes is also associated with a poor diet that is laden with high-fructose corn syrup and low in fiber. Research indicates that soft drinks largely contribute to this growing epidemic, with high school and college age kids being the most likely to consume sugar laden soda beverages on a regular basis.

Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are bad news, according to health experts, because they contribute to the obesity epidemic by providing empty calories, that is, calories that provide little or no nutritional value. Meaning, a person who slugs down too much soda is swallowing more than their body can handle. And this added energy isn't healthy energy -- it's energy derived from high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), i.e., highly refined sugar that has been chemically processed in order to excite your taste buds. It has been argued that too much HFCS in one's diet may offset the intake of solid food, yet does not produce a positive caloric balance. In turn, this over-consumption contributes to the slow development of obesity because the person is consuming more calories than their body can burn. And these days, people are drinking more soda than ever before. Perhaps not surprisingly, as portion sizes for soft drinks have increased, so have American waistlines.

Too put this dangerous pattern in to perspective, one regular 12-ounce can of sugar-sweetened soda contains approximately 150 calories with close to 50 grams of sugar. If this is added to the typical American diet, one can of soda per day could lead to a weight gain of 15 pounds in one year. Currently the consumption of soda accounts for about 8%-9% of total energy among children and adults, and studies suggest that it is most certainly having a negative effect on the people who consume it in such vast quantities. So what's so wrong with being overweight then, you ask? So what if soda has been linked to causing obesity? What's wrong with that? Well, plenty say scores of medical, health and public nutrition experts.

For starters, obesity increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, bowel cancer as well as high blood pressure. Type 2 diabetes alone can contribute to cardiovascular disease, retinopathy (blindness), neuropathy (nerve damage),

nephropathy (kidney damage), and other health complications. So if type 2 diabetes is highly associated with individuals who are obese, and obesity is linked to SSBs, then type 2 diabetes is highly associated with the consumption of SSBs because the consumption of SSBs is so highly associated with causing obesity. In short, if one consumes SSBs on a regular basis, they are more at risk of developing type 2 diabetes, which itself may cause many ailments. That's why being overweight is not a good thing for one's health. And that's why drinking copious amounts of sugar-sweetened beverages contributes to poor wellbeing byway of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

On top of causing one to gain unhealthy weight and spurring type 2 diabetes, SSBs may also contribute to the loss of bone density, which may cause one to be more susceptible to bone fractures. It has been argued that low bone density may be a result of high levels of phosphate, which is found in elevated amounts in sugar-sweetened cola. Such large amounts of phosphate may alter the calcium-phosphorus ratio in people whose bodies are still developing, or people who are most likely to consume SSBs, and consequently this can have a toxic effect on their bone development. If a growing individual has a low calcium intake it could jeopardize bone mass, which may then contribute to hip fractures and other bone related disorders later in life. Drinking a lot of SSBs while your body develops could have lasting, deadly effects on your health. So while it is clear that soda isn't good for you, it is also obvious that soda is downright bad for your health. It can make you overweight, suck the calcium out of your bones, and increase risk of type 2 diabetes, a leading cause of blindness. But that's not the kind of news the profiteers of big soda would ever want you to hear.

The marketing firms that barrage consumers with ads for their mouth-watering soft drinks hope to encourage you to drink more of their harmful products, not less of them. Indeed they have a financial incentive to do so. Their annual revenues are billions of dollars. To protect their interests, as Prof. Marion Nestle of NYU notes, the soda industry shells out tons of money to convince people to consume their products in mass quantities. In the late 1990s, Coca-Cola spent about \$1.6 billion dollars in global marketing, with over \$850 million spent in the United States alone. With that kind of lavish spending, it is little wonder why Coca-Cola is such a household name. Clearly, those who advocate for cutting down on the consumption of SSBs because of their negative health impacts are up against a very well financed opposition -- not unlike the anti-smoking activists who take on the shenanigans and deceit of Big Tobacco.

Nevertheless, Coca-Cola, like its competitors, is extremely savvy. They have inundated schools with their products. As Michele Simon, the author of *Appetite for Profit*, writes, "A 2003 government survey showed that 43 percent of elementary schools, 74 percent of middle schools, and 98 percent of high schools sold food through vending machines, snack bars, or other venues outside the federally supported school meal programs ... With public schools so desperate for funding, districts are lured into signing exclusive contracts (also known as "pouring rights" deals) with major beverage companies -- mainly Coca-Cola and PepsiCo".

In other words, these multinational corporations give millions of dollars to schools so that their districts and vending machines exclusively carry their goods. In reality, however, it comes down to one big clever marketing ploy: In the end these big corporations have hooked kids on their products while fooling people into believing they are virtuous corporate citizens because they support education.

Fortunately there is a growing movement across the country to ban sodas from schools. Indeed the feisty Killer Coke campaign, which focuses on the company's

labor abuses and not Coke's negative health implications, has been successful in banning the product from over 10 major universities in the United States. But it would be wise to not just focus on the company's alleged murders in Colombia, and instead broaden the struggle against the soda industry by pointing out their complicity in the obesity epidemic worldwide.

Because death truly is the "real thing."

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