

Diet soda — how healthy is it?

It's hot, and you're thirsty, and if you are like most Americans the first drink you reach for will be a soda pop - a carbonated soft drink. If you're worried about your sugar or caloric intake, your choice will likely be a diet soda. Companies have spent billions of dollars convincing all of us that diet soda is the healthier, lighter choice - that all we have to lose is the calories, ergo the weight. And since so many of us are struggling with weight gain, who can blame us if diet soda seems like a dream come true?

But in my experience, it's actually a wolf in sheep's clothing, fooling women into thinking they are doing something good for their bodies when they are actually sabotaging their own best efforts.

Diet soda may not have the sugar or calories of regular soda, but it's chock-full of other health-draining chemicals, like caffeine, artificial sweeteners, sodium and phosphoric acid. **This is even more concerning when parents give their growing — and chemically vulnerable — children diet soda in a noble effort to avoid sugar.**

And while I admit that diet soda may have its uses in the short term — particularly if you are dealing with a sugar addiction — I encourage you to resist it as your default beverage, especially if you are trying to lose weight. Different studies have been flying around on this subject, but a majority show that diet soda may actually set you up to gain even more weight.

If you really want to do something good for your body and your BMI, exchange that can of diet soda for a cool glass of filtered water. If this sounds like deprivation to you, I can sympathize. Let's discuss diet soda and how you can begin to give it less of a starring role in your nutrition.

America's love of soda

Americans buy and consume a tremendous amount of soda. According to *Beverage Digest*, overall sales of soda (sugar and diet) were 10.2 billion cases in 2005; that rounds out to be about 828 eight-ounce servings a year (or 2-½ servings per day) for every man woman and child. And that number is actually down from 849 last year, mostly due to the rise in energy drinks — which come with their own concerns. As a population, soda is our mainstay: caloric, non-caloric and “reduced-calorie.” Stand in the soda aisle of the supermarket and just try to count all the varieties — it's staggering.

A regular 12-ounce soda contains the equivalent of nine teaspoons of sugar, usually in the form of high-fructose corn syrup. Imagine drinking a 12-ounce glass of iced tea with nine teaspoons of sugar stirred into it, or eating nine teaspoons of sugar, one after another? That's essentially what people do when they drink a sugared soda. It is liquid candy, ruthlessly advertised and manufactured to give our jaded taste buds an even sweeter sensation.

Is it any wonder that we are gaining unprecedented amounts of weight and even our children are developing type 2 diabetes? We have the dubious distinction of being the most overweight of all economically developed nations. With statistics like these, who wouldn't believe that choosing a diet soda is the healthier choice?

But consider this: we are also the number-one consumer of artificial sweeteners in the world.

No one can deny that a diet soda has fewer calories than a regular soda. If you get a disproportionate amount of your daily caloric intake from soda and then you switch to diet soda, you may lose weight. But I emphasize the word may, because it appears that artificial sweeteners can actually set us up to gain more weight.

The myth of **artificial sweeteners and weight loss**

There are many different views in this matter, but a host of scientists agree that artificial sweeteners may interact with our body's sense of sugar satisfaction.

Some experts are now exploring the possibility that artificial sweeteners confuse our taste buds and all those brain measures of satiety upon which we base what we eat. Specifically, Sharon P. Fowler, MPH, and colleagues at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio have recently completed compilations of data that provided surprising results.

Fowler and her team studied more than 1500 people between the ages of 25 and 64, looking at whether each consumed regular or diet soft drinks. It was no surprise to find a correlation between the daily consumption of multiple cans of all soft drinks and obesity — which they did. But, as Fowler noted, “What was surprising was when we looked at people only drinking diet soft drinks; their risk of obesity was even higher” [than that of those drinking regular soft drinks]. In fact, Fowler found that for each can of diet soft drink consumed per day, the risk of obesity went up by 41%.

Other studies have found different variations, but a distinct pattern is emerging. Certain data indicate that the body learns to predict caloric intake by the taste and texture of certain foods. When artificial sweeteners are introduced into the mix, our body sends the appropriate sweet signals to the brain but never delivers the sugar punch.

The **diet soda** trade-off game

No expert is presuming that the diet sodas themselves are making people gain weight. But there does seem to be some connection, and what is being further explored is the idea that by offering our taste buds something that seems sweet, and seems to signal other parts of our bodies that glucose sugars are on the way, we set ourselves up for cravings — to which we eventually and often unknowingly, give in. In other words, consuming artificial sweeteners that seem real just might be setting us up to eat more later on.

This supposition has been borne out in a study conducted on rats at Purdue University. Professors Terry Davidson and Susan Swithers found that rats that were fed artificial sweeteners consistently ate more than the group fed high-calorie sweeteners.

Of course, there's also the possibility of our complicity in this trade-off, something Fowler and other researchers readily acknowledge. If we cut 150 calories here by opting for the diet soda instead of the sugared one, we may give ourselves permission for a little splurge along the way. (Think about how many times you've witnessed someone putting Sweet'n'Low in their coffee while tucking into an extravagant dessert.)

What's more, the 150 calories and nine teaspoons of sugar you forego in a diet soda are replaced with a host of other additives enlisted to make the beverage taste good and still provide a boost.

The extras you get — and really don't want

With diet drinks, not only do you miss out on any nutrients provided by the real sugars your body might find useful if consumed in reasonable quantities, you also get a laundry list of **suspicious ingredients** that work against your body's effort to maintain healthy balance.

Foremost among these is caffeine. Many of the diet drinks are cola-based or otherwise have caffeine added. It's part of the mix created by manufacturers to make soft drinks — particularly diet soft drinks — seem more substantial. Yes, it gives you a sugar-like “boost,” or seems to, but that caffeine buzz really isn't giving

your body anything it needs. And the complications of caffeine consumption and addiction are legion, with fatigue, chronic anxiety, insomnia, and worsening symptoms of hormonal imbalance topping the list.

Additionally, caffeine is a diuretic, so while you may be thinking that a diet soda quenches your thirst and helps keep you hydrated, the opposite is true. Diet soda often contains sodium, which exacerbates thirst, while the caffeine causes you to lose fluid.

All carbonated sodas also contain calcium-leaching phosphoric acid, and so much acid in your system can tilt your pH balance to an unhealthy level. Healthy detoxification takes place in a slightly alkaline environment. Too much acidity will sabotage the detox process.

If you think I'm being an alarmist, try this experiment: Fill a glass with soda, diet or regular, and drop a nail into the glass. Watch it over the course of an hour or two. You'll find that the soda eats away at the nail in a surprisingly short amount of time. Now think of what it can do to living stomach tissue!

In Eastern medicine, overconsumption of soda — particularly diet soda — is considered to be highly corrosive to the GI tract and the root of many digestive disorders. This is particularly troubling to me when it comes to children, because their bodies are still maturing.

When is **diet soda** okay?

At my practice, I sanction the short-term consumption of diet soda when a patient is used to drinking several sugared sodas a day and has a real sugar addiction. The only other scenarios in which I find soda drinking to be the lesser of two evils is when you are traveling in areas where the drinking water is unsafe or when you are sick to your stomach. The old wives' tale rings true for some: Coke and ginger ale do help soothe nausea.

In the case of sugar addiction, weaning off of sugar with the help of diet soda and other artificial sweeteners can really help — but you may still have to deal with an addiction to caffeine. This is a short-term solution; my ultimate goal is to switch all my patients over to water and decaffeinated herbal teas as their go-to beverages of choice.

Another useful substitute, particularly for children, is to dilute 1–2 ounces of fruit juice with carbonated mineral water, slowly decreasing the amount of fruit juice. Weaning yourself and your family from soda is really weaning them from the taste of sweet. No one is discounting how difficult this can be, but substituting diet soda won't do the trick. It actually encourages the taste for sweet! Sugar itself is a fact of life — it runs all living things. But just as I recommend eating foods that closely resemble their original form, I also encourage you to drink naturally sweetened beverages — and always in moderation.

Xylitol — a possible alternative

Naturally occurring sugars are better choices than refined sugar and artificial sweeteners because they are metabolized. The polyalcohol sugar, Xylitol, also called wood sugar or birch sugar, has long been used in Europe and Asia as a popular sweetener, and is popular with diabetics. Many sugarless gums are sweetened with xylitol because it helps prevent tooth decay and, perhaps, bone loss (There is a study in Finland looking at xylitol as a preventative for osteoporosis). Xylitol has about half the calories of sugar (3 calories per teaspoon) but it tastes sweeter, so you'll use less. However, it doesn't tweak the insulin receptors and contains some nutritive qualities — much like maple syrup.

I also use Stevia, but some of my patients have found they don't like the taste. The point is, there are other healthy alternatives out there. Opt for a natural sweetener and you may find you have fewer cravings!

On the other hand, if you are like so many people, women especially, and you simply can't live without diet soda, have you thought of asking yourself why?

Breaking the diet soda habit

If you hardly ever drink soda or sweeten your beverages, I think it is fine — even preferable — to use real sugar or drink the occasional Coke. This can even be therapeutic if you have an upset stomach. If you must allow your children to have the occasional soda, I think “the real thing” is best here, too.

But, if you find you have a habit of reaching for a diet drink, you could be driven by the caffeine, or it could be a behavioral habit, the sort of thing where grabbing that soda is what you do when you stop to gas-up the car or take a break from work. But the physiological addiction to caffeine is very real, and habits can feed one another.

I encourage you to see your choice of beverages as an opportunity to tune in to your body. Chances are, if you have any degree of dependency on sugared or diet drinks, your body is sending you mixed signals and you react with mixed responses. So, the next time you reach for a soda, take a moment and think first: What can I drink to best serve my body's needs?

It may be time to make a transition to the best of all possible drinks: water. With the hectic schedule so many of us keep, it's possible that when you think you want a diet soda or sugary drink (or for that matter, an alcoholic beverage), you are simply thirsty.

Sometimes we forget how refreshing and satisfying a glass of cool water can be, particularly if your system is accustomed to drinks with all sorts of other ingredients. Water is also the key to weight loss. It not only hydrates all of the body's systems, but it cleanses the body of toxins. (In fact, it's probably flushing out some of the things left over from processing ingested artificial sweeteners!) (See our article on Artificial Sugar)

Water may not be all your body's asking for when you reach for that diet drink. Are you hungry? Hungry is okay — we all need to eat. Even if you are trying to lose weight or otherwise monitoring your calorie intake, when you are hungry a healthy body will tell you so, and you should not be afraid to listen. Many of my patients are surprised to find that when they eat more of the right foods, they lose weight.

The bad, the better, the best — and balance

Here are a few strategies toward more healthful choices:

1. **One of the most fundamental strategies you can take to help your body deal with the demands placed on it by diet soda is to take a well balanced whole-food supplement**, enriched with calcium, magnesium and essential fatty acids. In modern life it is practically impossible to eat sufficient food to get the nutrients you need without overloading on calories — unless you happen to be a long-distance runner by profession or avocation. If are considering a weight-loss program, consult our [21-Day Purification Program](#). Most important, any weight loss you do achieve will cause you to release toxins stored in body fat, so you need to be sure to get the properly balanced nutrition for maximum results and stay well-hydrated to eliminate those stored toxins.
2. **Look for products sweetened with what are called sugar alcohols, particularly xylitol.**

3. **Don't skip meals and substitute a diet soda.** It just doesn't make any sense. You run the risk of eating more later on, and you really haven't given your body any of the nutrients it needs.

4. **Consider delving further into when and why you turn to diet or caffeinated drinks.** What else is going on in your life? Are there factors driving your dietary choices that have nothing to do with what you eat? Are you tired or stressed out? Do you habitually pair drinking soda with some other activity? Are you eating or drinking sodas because you're bored? For purely social reasons? One sure way to find answers to these questions is to try going without diet drinks and caffeine for a couple weeks, while tracking how you feel.

5. **Drink at least eight 8-oz glasses of filtered water per day** — sparkling or “still,” but at least half should be still. Try drinking half your body weight in pounds, but in ounces of water (if you aren't extremely overweight). A 140-pound woman would drink 70 ounces of filtered water per day for weight loss. After a few days, you may find that with more water on board your craving for diet soda softens and slips away.

Consider what diet really means

The word “diet” means what constitutes the usual food and drink of a person or animal. For me, the most important part of that sentence is “usual” — not “diet.” To sustain a healthy weight and a healthy body, you need to support your body's natural balance. Chemicals and caffeine don't do this, no matter what the soda manufacturers tell you.

If you find that you like the occasional sugared or diet soda, don't be too hard on yourself. Try following the 80/20 rule: if you're healthy and making smart choices most of the time, the occasional indulgence is better tolerated. We all do the best we can for ourselves and families; the key is to make the “best” the “usual” — and avoid sodas as part of your daily routine. So take a few steps away from the habit of diet soda and see how you feel. Have a glass of cool clear water, then see if you really want that soda. Your vibrant health may be all the reward you need.

Additional Notes:

For quality “Whole-food” Nutritional Support, contact our office so we can suggest the nutritional products that best fit your lifestyle.

Go to www.DrMcKinzie.com and click on Nutrition link.

Be careful of taking “processed, synthetic, isolated” vitamins and nutritional supplements. Whole-food based nutrition is a complement of all the naturally occurring vitamins, minerals, phytochemicals and “unknown” beneficial compounds found in raw, vine-ripened fruits and vegetables.