

Rethink Your Sugary Drink

This National Nutrition Week all South Africans are reminded to “Rethink Your Drink and Choose Water” from the 9th to 15th October. The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa aims to increase awareness of the harmful health effects of sugary drinks and instead, encourage South Africans to make water their drink of choice.

Sugary drinks are making South Africans sick

Sugar-sweetened beverages including fizzy drinks, flavoured water, sweetened tea or coffee, fruit juices and energy drinks are a significant source of added sugar in the diets of most South Africans. Worryingly, their intake seems to be increasing too. A study of 1 233 adults in North West Province showed that sugary drink intake doubled from 2005 to 2010. Over the 5 years more rural participants started drinking sugary drinks and urban consumers increased the amount they drank (1). Sugary drinks may be of even greater concern amongst children. In a recent international study of 6 000 9-11 year-olds, including South Africa, 60% of children reported drinking fizzy drinks at least weekly, and 11% had one or more every day (2).

One can of fizzy drink contains roughly 600 kilojoules of energy, which is 7% of typical daily energy requirements. This may sound like a small contribution, but it's a 7% you don't need. 600 kilojoules is the amount of extra energy you need to be moderately active for 30 minutes. “Our bodies don't compensate well for sugary drinks, which means it does not satisfy our hunger, and we don't adjust the rest of our food intake downwards. If your body stores 600 kilojoules every day, you will gain 6kg of weight in one year” says Gabriel Eksteen, Nutrition Science Programme manager at HSFA.

Unsurprisingly, drinking just one sugary drink a day increases the likelihood of being overweight by 27% in adults and 55% in children (3). It seems fitting that World Obesity Day, on 16 October, coincides with the South African Nutrition Week. Obesity has reached astonishing rates worldwide, including in South Africa where nearly half of women and 15% of men are obese.

Although obesity and diabetes are the most common consequences of excessive sugar intake, mounting research suggests damage may also occur separately from weight gain. Sugar intake has independently been linked to high blood pressure, lower ‘good’ or HDL cholesterol levels, fatty liver disease, and metabolic syndrome - all of whom increase the risk of heart disease and strokes.

It's predicted, based on current trends, that 2.7 billion adults worldwide will suffer from overweight and obesity by 2025. Treatment for obesity related health problems will rack up an estimated annual global medical bill reaching US\$1.2 trillion per year by 2025 (4). The World Obesity Forum started World Obesity Day on 11 October 2015 and this year they are calling on all governments, health service providers, insurers and philanthropic organisations to ‘Act Now’ to ‘avoid the consequences later!’

When faced with these economic and health impacts, policy interventions such as the proposed *sugar sweetened beverage (SSB) tax* makes complete sense. The CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa, Professor Pamela Naidoo states that “the SSB tax once implemented will provide the budget that can be allocated to health promotion initiatives in South Africa. There is evidence from other countries, such as Mexico, that SSB tax is beneficial in reducing obesity”.

How much sugar is too much?

Both the American Heart Association and the World Health Organisation recommends limiting ‘free’ sugar to less than 5% of total energy intake for maximum benefit. This includes any sugar in a food or drink that was added by the manufacturer, sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices,

and sugar added at home. 5% equates to 6 to 9 teaspoons of sugar per day from all food and drinks, depending on age and gender. To put this in perspective, one fizzy drink typically contains 40 grams of sugar, or 10 teaspoons.

“It is important to emphasize that sugars naturally found in whole fruits and unsweetened dairy is not included in these limits. Eating plenty of fruit and regularly drinking unsweetened milk has many health benefits, including for heart health” says Megan Lee, dietitian at the HSFSa. A food label is an excellent tool to see how much sugar a food or beverage contains. It is also important to read the ‘ingredient list’ together with the ‘nutrition information table’ to determine whether the total sugar in the product is mostly added sugar.

With the vast array of processed foods containing added sugar including pasta sauces, salad dressings and baked products, reducing excess sugar poses a significant challenge for the public. A simple way for the public to meaningfully reduce their sugar intake is to cut down on sugary beverages. Policy changes like SSB tax, limiting advertising and improved labelling on packaging can all play a major role.

Marketing and advertising in particular needs to be addressed, as they are key factors influencing the consumption of sugary drinks. A recent survey by PRICELESS SA revealed that energy and sports drinks are the fastest growing market in the beverage sector, and targeted advertising is a main strategy to increase their consumption (5). Energy drinks are essentially fizzy drinks high in caffeine targeted at adolescents and young adults. While sports drinks have a time and place for athletes, the vast majority are consumed inappropriately, contributing to excess sugar intake.

Water always wins

Even though sugar-free flavoured drinks are better alternatives to the full-sugar version, clean fresh water is still the best replacement for sugary drinks. Water serves numerous essential purposes in the body including keeping you hydrated, lubricating joints, assists with digestion and helps to prevent constipation. Importantly, water is far cheaper than other drinks, and can be cost saving health improvement. The reduction in sugar and kilojoules when changing to water will ultimately help to maintain a healthy weight and lower the risk of developing diabetes or heart disease.

“Drinking water by no means needs to be boring”, adds Megan Lee, Registered Dietitian at the HSFSa. “Add a twist to your water by adding cucumber slices, mint leaves, unsweetened fruity herbal teas, or fruit such as lemon, grapefruit, berries, pineapple or watermelon. Add sparkling water if you’re craving some fizz”. For those moments when you’re really not in the mood for water, then swap your sugary drink for healthier alternatives such as sugar-free soda’s, homemade iced tea, 100% fruit juice diluted with water or a good old glass of milk”. Ms Lee’s approach is consistent with the National Department of Health’s initiative which promotes water as a drink of choice.

National Nutrition Week Activities

The Association of Dietetics in South Africa will be hosting a Twitter Talk from 13h00 to 14h00 on Wednesday the 11th October. Dietitians and National Nutrition Week partners throughout South Africa will be answering questions. Join the conversation live on Twitter via their handle @ADSA_RD or track the hashtag #RethinkYourDrink to get great tips and advice on making better beverage choices. The Department of Health in the various provinces will also support National Nutrition Week with activities to encourage the public to drink more water.

National Nutrition Week is a National Department of Health Initiative and the HSFSa is one of its partners. For more information on National Nutrition Week, please visit the website www.nutritionweek.co.za

Ends

References

1. <http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/99/6/1479.long>
2. <http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/8/12/770/htm>
3. <http://www.bmj.com/content/bmj/351/bmj.h3576.full.pdf>
4. <http://www.obesityday.worldobesity.org/>
5. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743517301743?via%3Dihub>

HSFSA contact person

Nuraan Cader
Public Relations & Communications Manager
Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa
nuraan.cader@heartfoundation.co.za
021 422 1586