Liquid Candy

Soda pop was once an occasional treat for millions of people. I remember drinking Coke on picnics or at Sunday dinners when I was a kid in the 1950s. I pretty much gave up sugary drinks in the 1970s as I learned about the sugar, dyes, and other things they contained. But at the same time, America was gulping them down with ever greater alacrity.

Vending machines were being installed everywhere. Fast-food restaurants helped make soft drinks the default beverage for new generations of kids. Container sizes ballooned from 6½ ounces to 12 ounces to 20 ounces. Restaurants and convenience stores started offering half-gallon cups and free refills.

Consumption of regular soda tripled between 1957 and 1998, when the industry produced about 450 12-ounce servings for every American. And that doesn’t include the gallons of sugar-laden non-carbonated fruit drinks, bottled teas, energy drinks, and sports drinks that we swallow each year. Some people, especially teens, drink a six-pack a day of sugary drinks and get a quarter of their calories from the added sugars.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (publisher of Nutrition Action) began a serious campaign against soft drinks in 1998 when we published Liquid Candy: How Soft Drinks are Harming Americans’ Health.

Dentists had long argued that soda causes cavities. New research was linking soft drinks to weight gain and obesity—a cause of heart attacks, strokes, diabetes, and cancer. Soft drinks also displace nutrient-rich milk.

Non-diet soda peaked in 1998. Since then, we’ve cut our consumption every year, so that by 2010 we drank almost 25 percent less than in 1998. Bottled water (much of it marketed by Coke and Pepsi) has taken up the slack.

The battle against sugary beverages is in full swing. Boston and New York City are ridding public office buildings and parks of them. And health departments are creating anti-soda videos (for New York City’s, see youtube.com/user/drinking sugar).

The Food and Drug Administration also needs to act. It should require warning notices on soft drinks, set a Daily Value for “added sugars,” and require added sugars (instead of total sugars) on Nutrition Facts labels. And the government should get sugary drinks out of cafeterias and vending machines in office buildings, national parks, and other facilities.

But the single most important thing that federal, state, and local governments could do would be to slap a tax on all sugary drinks. Depending on the rate (some have proposed one cent per ounce or 12 cents per can), a national excise tax would reduce consumption by up to 23 percent, generate $15 billion annually, and help fund programs that promote health. Now that would be sweet.

Soda Summit: June 7-8
Washington, DC

A national conference of health experts and concerned citizens to develop strategies to shove the soda-pop genie back into the bottle.

For the agenda and registration information, visit fewsugarydrinks .org

MEMO FROM MFJ

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New York City has mounted the heaviest anti-soda campaign to date.

The contents of NAI are not intended to provide medical advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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