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## Stay Away From Soft Drinks

Soft drinks and other sugary beverages contribute to weight gain and obesity, according to a new review of research on the subject. This may seem as if it's stating the obvious, but experts have been arguing for years over how much, if any, sugary beverages are contributing to obesity in the general population.

On one side are nutrition researchers who say soft drinks add weight because they are high in sugar and calories but don't make people feel full and satisfied. On the other side are public policy experts and beverage industry representatives who say people can enjoy all kinds of drinks as part of a healthful diet. They say many things contribute more to extra pounds, including sedentary living. My opinion is that if you want to drink high calorie drinks, you had better be compensating for it by exercising significantly more.

The debate is being renewed at a time when schools are re-evaluating their beverage offerings and many are booting such drinks out of school vending machines. Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health examined 30 studies. Among their conclusions reported in August's *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* are the following:

- Many studies show that heavy adults and children are more likely to drink sugary beverages.
- Several studies show that an increased intake in sugar-sweetened drinks results in greater weight gain over time and greater risk of obesity.
- A one-year intervention study showed that reducing the intake of soft drinks in school-age children reduced the incidence of excess weight and obesity.

"There is no perfect study on this important issue, so we looked at the entire literature to see if there is a pattern," says Frank Hu, a researcher at Harvard and senior author of the study.

Soft drinks "clearly have no vitamins, no minerals, no phytochemicals (chemicals or nutrients from a plant source), so they're basically empty calories," Hu says. "By reducing them, you are not losing anything but the calories."

Barry Popkin, nutrition professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says: "Satiety studies show we do not compensate for calories from beverages by consuming

less food. So when we consume caloric beverages, we add almost all of these calories to our total daily caloric intake."

But Richard Adamson, a scientific consultant for the American Beverage Association, says the article leaves out "competing studies" that contradict those conclusions. "To try to pinpoint obesity on any one beverage or any one food is in my opinion absurd, and the facts don't support it," he says. I don't know about you but that response doesn't sound logical. It is like saying to say that we shouldn't discourage excessive consumption of alcohol because it is not the single solitary reason why some people can become alcoholics.

Richard Forshee, director of research for the Center for Food, Nutrition and Agriculture Policy at the University of Maryland, has reviewed the research. "Whatever small association may exist is not large enough to have a major impact on the obesity problem," he says. Again, I think this is a poor argument. True, removing pop from elementary school cafeterias will not make all the obese kids suddenly skinny. However, by reducing the exposure our kids have to empty calories is a step in the right direction.

In summary, no one denies that soft drinks contain calories, and because they contain calories they should be consumed in moderation and in conjunction with regular exercise. They are not part of a "balanced" diet. When it comes to solving the overall obesity problem, eliminating soft drinks from your diet will help. However, I think it is even more important to encourage physical activity and limit sedentary behavior.