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Diet Sodas & Artificial Sweeteners

Is Diet Soda “Healthy”?

I am often asked if diet soda is a healthy drink. The short answer is no. The long answer is that they are likely bad for you, but not for the reasons most people think. Past concerns that some artificial sweeteners could cause cancer don't have much support.

The main problems are that diet sodas aren't really “diet” and the problems they cause with how your body responds to artificial sweeteners.

The first problem is that “diet” sodas don't really work the way they are advertised. The original concept for “diet” sodas was that by replacing sugar with a zero-calorie artificial sweetener, you could satisfy your sweet tooth and lose weight at the same time. What's not to like about that? The problem is that studies to date have shown that switching to diet soda doesn't result in weight loss, so calling these drinks “diet” is misleading. Even worse, many recent studies show the opposite happens, drinking diet soda is associated with gaining weight.



Why Would “Diet” Soda Cause You to Gain Weight?

The conclusion of several studies is that artificial sweeteners make you hungry. There are several possible explanations for this. One explanation has to do with how your body responds to sugar. When you taste sweet, your body starts making insulin (a hormone that controls sugar in the blood stream) before what you eat or drink gets to your stomach. Your body is expecting a load of sugar on the way, but when the diet soda starts getting absorbed by your stomach, there is no sugar for the insulin to respond to. This causes your blood sugar to drop which then makes you hungry. So, although the diet soda has no calories, it makes you hungry and you eat more food.

Diet Sodas, Adding Calories, and Sweet Cravings

There may also be several behavioral reasons that explain the link between diet soda, hunger and weight gain. The first is that people who drink a diet soda think that because they drank something with

no calories, they can now eat something with more calories. Often times the food they eat has even more calories than the amount of calories they avoided with the diet soda, the net result being more calories consumed and increased weight. A second reason that artificial sweeteners seem to lead to weight gain is that artificial sweeteners lead to sugar craving and dependence. Regular use resets your taste buds to expect more sweetness, leading people to crave sugar and want foods to be sweeter.

Better Choices

The potential problems with “diet” sodas and artificial sweeteners are now being confirmed with recent studies showing that regular use is associated with increased chances of developing metabolic syndrome, diabetes, heart disease and strokes. The safe and healthy choice is to stick with water, coffee, tea or milk.



Sources:

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Dr. Bob Rauner is the Director of **Partnership for A Healthy Lincoln**, a local nonprofit dedicated to improving community health, wellness, and fitness. Partnership for a Healthy Lincoln works to improve wellness policies, conduct health research, and collaborate with community partners to promote healthy nutrition, increase fitness, and decrease obesity-related chronic diseases in our city and county. For more information visit www.healthylincoln.org