**Sweetened Soft Drinks and Child Health & Wellbeing**

Fizzy and still sweetened soft drinks have become a big part of many children’s diets in recent years. This is not surprising. They taste sweet, and are heavily branded and advertised. We need to drink to stay healthy. Our bodies need plenty of water. However, most soft drinks contain not just water but sugar, a range of chemical and sometimes caffeine. All of these affect our health and wellbeing in the short and the long term.

There are so many different soft drinks on the market, we have decided to put this guide together. It is intended for parents, carers, and professionals who work with children. In addition, older children may find some of the information useful themselves, as they will be making more independent decisions. The guide is written in the form of frequently asked questions and answers. We hope you find it helpful.

***We all have sugar in our diet. How much is too much?***

Older children should have **no more than 5 teaspoons of added sugar per day (25g)**. Younger children should have no more than 3. These limits come from the World Health Organisation (Based on a maximum of 5% of calories from “free” sugars). For teenagers in Scotland, 15 to 20 teaspoons is quite typical and sugary drinks are a major source.

***How much sugar is in fizzy drinks?***

Many popular soft drink brands contain about 10% sugar. This means that each 500ml bottle provides **10 teaspoons of sugar (or 50g)**. This is 2 to 3 times the recommended maximum from the daily diet as a whole. On top of sugary drinks, we also have added sugar in many foods.

***Why is too much sugar not good for you?***

Sugary drinks in particular can lead to too much weight gain. Also, even in children who are slim, it can affect the liver and the long term risk of heart problems. For a healthy heart and liver, it is the **total quantity of sugar** in a day that matters.

Sugary drinks damage teeth. Also, most sugary drinks are acidic. The acid also damages teeth. For healthy teeth, what really matters is **how often** they are in contact with sugar and acid. It is not quite as harmful **to teeth** when taken alongside a meal. Sipping a sugary drink over a long time is very harmful to teeth. However, drinking a large serving quickly may not be so good for the liver!

Pure fruit juices and smoothies also count as sources of sugar. However, small amounts are OK as they provide some nutrition too. Remember that these drinks are also harmful too teeth in drunk too often. 200mls (a third of a pint) a day is plenty.

***Apart from too much sugar and acid, is there anything else in soft drinks that can be harmful?***

Many sweetened soft drinks contain food additives. These are used to improve the look, taste and shelf life of drinks. Some of these affect children’s concentration and behaviour. This includes some of the bright colours and preservatives. Check the label. Drinks using potential harmful colourings provide a warning in very small print! These colours are used in some of Scotland’s most popular soft drinks.

***Are “diet” drinks any better?***

Most drinks use sugar or syrup to provide sweetness. Some use chemicals instead. These are often labelled “diet”, sugar free” or “zero”. They are usually much lower in calories. Commonly used sweeteners include Aspartame, Acesulfame K, and Sucralose. Some drinks use a mixture of sugar and artificial sweeteners.

Although most diet drinks do not provide sugar or calories, they are still very sweet. If children get used to such a sweet taste, it may be hard to appreciate the subtle sweetness of fruit and vegetables. Diet drinks are also often high in acid and therefore still harmful to teeth. Most “flavoured waters” also contain artificial sweeteners and are also often acidic.

***I’ve heard that “Energy drinks” contain caffeine. Should I be concerned about this?***

Too much caffeine makes us sweat, shake, and can cause headaches and stomach aches. It also makes sleep more difficult and is addictive. Stopping caffeine when you are used to it can also cause headaches. High intakes can also cause an irregular heartbeat.

***How much caffeine do they contain and how much is too much for children?***

Most energy drinks come in 500ml cans or bottles. These typically provide the same amount of caffeine as two cups of coffee. They also typically provide about 10 teaspoons of sugar. Popular brands include Monster, Red Bull, Relentless, No Fear, and Rockstar. They are not suitable for children under 16 and this is stated on the label. However, some shops still sell them to children under this age. Each 500ml can or bottle gives around **160mg** of caffeine. Many experts believe that **100mg per day** is sensible daily limit for children between 10 and 14 years of age. This may be too much for younger children.

We are not sure what effect caffeine and sugar, in combination, have on young children. Older children might cope well with the amount of caffeine in 1 ***small*** can of energy drink (80mg caffeine) occasionally. However, some children have more than 1 large can per day. 2 large cans provide 20 teaspoons of sugar and the same caffeine level as 4 cups of coffee or 8 cups of tea.

***Isn’t there caffeine in cola and other soft drinks?***

Colas, Irn Bru, Lucozade energy and several other drinks also contain caffeine but the level in one can is more similar to a cup of tea. I serving will not give too much caffeine for older children but will give too much sugar. Drink companies claim they add caffeine for “flavouring”. However, caffeine is addictive so it may make us go back for more!

***Don’t Energy drinks give you a boost?***

Having energy drinks instead of a meal (such as breakfast) may well give a quick boost, but lead to a dip in energy, mood and concentration an hour or two later, once the sugar and caffeine start to wear off.

***What about energy drinks as mixers for alcohol?***

Alcoholic drinks cannot be sold to people under 18 years of age. However, a significant number of children do drink some alcohol, often away from home and without the consent or knowledge of their parents. Alcohol can cause many problems and this is beyond the scope of this information sheet. However, it is worth saying something about alcoholic drinks and energy drinks in combination. The caffeine creates the illusion of being more sober than you are, and so encourages drinking even more alcohol. Caffeine and alcohol together can cause increased physical and psychological side effects, such as heart palpitations, and feeling tense or agitated. They can also lead to risky behaviours and poor decision making, such as getting in to a fight, poor road safety, or unsafe sex.

***My teenage son has difficulty sleeping. Could energy drink be to blame?***

Caffeine takes around 3 to 5 hours to wear off. This means that drinking energy drinks during the evening might make getting to sleep difficult. There are many other causes of poor sleep of course.

***What about sports drinks?***

Sports drinks are often “isotonic”. This means they have some sugar but at a lower level than other sugary drinks. It is supposed to help you “rehydrate” quickly during sport. Most sports drinks have about 5% sugar. This is half the level found in many standard fizzy drinks. A 500ml serving will typically contain 5 teaspoons of sugar. Some of these drinks also contain caffeine. A little caffeine before sport can improve sporting performance. However, this won’t work if you take a lot of caffeine when you are not doing sport.

***I avoid fizzy drinks and use diluting juice instead. Are these OK?***

Diluting juices and fruit squashes are often given to younger children. Just like with fizzy drinks, they often contain sugar or other sweeteners and food additives. They are also acidic. Squashes without added sugar are usually labelled “sugar free” or “low sugar” and contain artificial sweeteners. If you do use a fruit squash or diluting juice, dilute it well and avoid using it too often or between meals. Even squashes that include real fruit juice do not provide much nutrition. Once a “high juice” squash is diluted, it is only 10% fruit juice may still include added sugar. Most of these drinks no longer contain the colours known to affect behaviour. However, most contain preservatives.

***Are milkshakes OK?***

They provide the nutrition of milk but also lots of sugar. Check the label. Avoid milkshakes with more than 10g per 100mls of sugars or in large, 500ml bottles. Some come in small, 200ml bottles. Alternatively, you could consider a pre-made or homemade dairy smoothie with fruit and yoghurt or milk.

***What about tea and coffee?***

Coffee is high in caffeine. Levels vary greatly. Tea also contains quite a lot. Older children can include a cup of tea or coffee a day if they wish. Unlike “Energy drinks” it is unlikely to contain 10 teaspoons of sugar! Its best to limit or avoid tea of coffee in the evening as it can make sleep more difficult. Hot chocolate can a little caffeine but less than tea or coffee. However, it is usually very high in sugar. Caffeine free herbal and fruit teas are also available.

***What’s the best drink for children?***

Water….and plenty if it! In addition to water, milk is nutritious and kind to teeth. A small amount of pure juice or a smoothie, as part of a meal, once a day is also fine. It contains vitamins and minerals. The smoothies also have a little fibre too. Large or frequent servings will provide too much sugar. Water out of the tap is cheap, healthy and widely available! Brand conscious teenagers may prefer branded mineral waters which are more expensive than tap water but often no more expensive than sugary soft drinks.

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