

Your Heart Attack Didn't Start Today: How Drinking Less Soda Can Help Keep You Out of the Emergency Department

A woman in her 50s came into the emergency department at Oneida Health with chest pain. She has diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and is obese. An electrical picture of her heart showed that she was having her first heart attack. As we arranged for her transfer to a hospital for cardiac catheterization, a life-saving surgical intervention, I returned to her room to find that she was drinking from a two-liter of Mountain Dew.

Sugary drinks are an often-sneaky contributor to an unhealthy diet. Most commonly, these are sodas, fruit juices, sports drinks, energy drinks, or sweetened coffees or teas. Say your coworker drinks a large vanilla iced coffee with cream and sugar every morning. Their daily drink has the same total sugar as more than half a dozen glazed donuts from the same chain restaurant. Even as a medium size, that drink has more sugar than an entire sleeve of Oreos. Buying you or your child a standard Gatorade or 12-ounce bottle of orange juice? Each is like eating more than two twinkies worth of sugar. In Madison and Oneida Counties, more than 1 in 3 adults have more than one of these beverages daily.

According to the Madison and Oneida County Community Health Assessments, 1 out of 3 adults have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and obesity. Seven out of 10 have high blood sugar, and about 1 in 7 have diabetes. One in 5 children and teens are obese. As a medical student working in the emergency department, I see patients diagnosed with these conditions sometime in the middle of their lives – but they realistically start much earlier and are formed by our habits of consumption. What we put into our bodies shapes them, how they work, and how long they last.

One soda a day might not seem so bad, but the constant flow of calories and sugar adds up. It leads to obesity, high cholesterol, diabetes, and hypertension, which can increase your risk for known killers in the emergency department like stroke and heart attacks. They also wear down your teeth – in 2012, 3 out of 4 children in our area had cavities, the highest rate in New York. Poor oral health has also been shown to be linked to heart disease and diabetes. Sweetened drinks may not seem related to the pain in your knee, but the extra weight gain from the sugar and calories puts more stress on your joints, damaging them faster over time. It has the same effect on your heart, blood vessels, and other organs. Medications like lisinopril, atorvastatin, and metformin can help correct these chronic diseases, but they ultimately can't replace or stop the effects of a poor diet. That heart attack I saw in the emergency department didn't start that morning – it started years ago with the patient's daily Mountain Dew.

However, you can change your behavior to help keep yourself out of the emergency department. Water is the best thing both for your body and wallet. Hydrating with as few calories and sugar as possible is the goal – and water is the perfect double zero. Lacking harmful additives and excess nutrients, it helps to cleanse your body of naturally built-up wastes, and is therefore the healthiest choice for your brain, heart, and gut.

Can't stop sugary drinks cold turkey? No worries – seltzers are actually great substitutes to help you wean off (just make sure they are sugar free). Diet drinks, often labeled as “zero,” drop the sugar and calories, but add fake sweeteners that mimic sugar. Studies have shown that replacing some or all of your sugary drinks with diet versions can also help you lose weight and improve your cholesterol. For coffee and teas, black and unsweetened are great. Try making your own at home, or cutting down your order's flavors, sugar, and toppings to make the largest impact.

If you're grabbing a sweet drink, look at the label for naturally sourced options like monk fruit, stevia, allulose, and tagatose, which are generally regarded as safe and are less processed than other sugar alternatives that have a less clear effect of your long-term health.

Decreasing your intake of daily sugary drinks is a super simple, easy, and effective way to improve your health starting right now. Try making a change for a day, maybe two? Making it through a couple of months should establish your new healthy habit. Have your drink occasionally – make it a treat, not a default.

I see patients like Susan all too often – people whose emergencies started with repeating a choice daily, often without thinking about it. I challenge *you* to think about it. Drink water – fill your tank with the correct fuel to help you steer clear of the emergency department.

-----Other info not included-----

ONEIDA CHA:

-“ They believe that more could be done to show the **direct causal relationships between poor nutrition and unhealth conditions.**” “A couple suggested that nutrition education needs to be more **cause and effect related.** This means showing people that if they **eat an unhealthy diet,** they are **significant more at risk to develop diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disease**”

Chronic disease states contributing to acute problems of ED (heart disease, stroke) – HLD, HTN, Obesity, DMT2, OSA, COPD, asthma, arthritis, CKD

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In studies looking at how adding these drinks into people's daily consumption habits who are also allowed to drink normal sugary beverages as they please, they have been shown to lead to comparable or greater weight loss and maintenance over 1 year when compared to dieters only permitted to drink carbonated and non-carbonated water plus normal sugary drinks. People who added diet drinks also saw reductions in hip circumference and improved cholesterol.

It is suspected that sometimes having a replacement close to what you know, even if not the healthiest option, can still lead to solid results.

According to UChicago Medicine, seltzers provide the fizziness of soda, can help you feel full, and drop the sugar, calories, and major artificial additives present in diet beverages.

Studies have shown that even when people switch some of their normal sugary drinks to diet drinks, they can still lose weight comparable to or sometimes better than people only allowed to drink waters and sugary drinks.

-----References-----

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