Sugary drinks

Key points

- Sugary drinks include soft drinks, cordial, energy drinks, sports drinks, fruit drinks and flavoured mineral waters.
- A 600 mL bottle of non-diet soft drink contains 16 teaspoons of sugar.
- Frequent drinking of sugary drinks can cause tooth decay, unhealthy weight gain and an increased risk of serious health problems such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes.
- Instead of a sugary drink, try sparkling water with a fruit infusion, herbal tea or even a vegetable juice smoothie instead.

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Sugary drinks, also called sugar-sweetened beverages, refer to any beverage with added sugar. This includes not only soft drinks, but also:

- sports drinks
- energy drinks
- fruit drinks
- ‘vitamin’ waters
- flavoured mineral waters

- cordial drinks.

Sugary drinks are a major contributor to the amount of added sugar in the Australian diet. But in positive news, over the last decade it appears people are drinking less of these types of drinks.

To show how much extra added sugar a person can have from sugary drinks, consider that a 375 mL can of soft drink has around 10 teaspoons of sugar.

But what is now considered a 'standard' soft drink serve has ballooned out to the more commonly purchased 600 mL bottle. That bottle contains 16 teaspoons of sugar.

There is a good reason why the Australian Dietary Guidelines do not recommend sugary drinks. That's because for all their extra unneeded sugar (and kilojoules), they offer few other nutrients. This includes protein, vitamins, minerals or dietary fibre.

Whilst flavoured milk has added sugar, it also contains calcium, protein and other important nutrients. These nutrients are not normally present in most common sugary drinks. Flavoured milk is also an option in the core milk, yoghurt, cheese and alternative group in the Australian Dietary Guidelines. If flavoured milk is drunk, serving sizes should be kept to a glass (250 mL) and chosen as an occasional option to unflavoured milk.

Sugary drinks and health

The most common health problems linked to sugary drinks include:

- overweight and obesity
- tooth decay
- type 2 diabetes
- heart disease
- hypertension (high blood pressure)
- stroke
- kidney stones
- reduced bone density.

There are now dozens of scientific studies that have looked at the link between sugary drinks and weight gain. And they consistently show that regular consumption of sugary drinks is associated with increased energy intake, long-term weight gain and obesity.

Carrying too much weight is a risk factor for chronic diseases including:

- cardiovascular disease
- type 2 diabetes
- some cancers.

The link to weight gain is likely explained by less feelings of fullness when sugar is consumed in a liquid form rather than eaten in solid food. The rapid passage of liquid through the stomach and intestines gives less time to send signals to your brain to tell you that you are full. This means people don't compensate for the high energy content of these beverages by eating less food.

What about fruit juice?

One of the biggest assumptions about 100% fruit juice is it must be healthy because it's full of 'natural sugars'. Fruit juice does indeed contain natural sugar, but the quantity (and kilojoules) is equal to the sugar content of most sugary soft drinks.

When you're drinking fruit instead of eating it, you're missing out on the pulp that's left behind. You may also be missing out on the skin in foods like apples – and that's where all the fibre is.

Fibre is an important nutrient for controlling body weight and keeping the digestive tract healthy. Most Australians aren't getting anywhere near the 30 grams for men and 25 grams for women of fibre recommended by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines includes fruit juice in the fruit category. But crucially, it is listed as 'only occasionally'. A standard serving of fruit juice is 125 mL or ½ cup. If you have fruit juice, limit it to this amount.

Or better still, drink water and eat the whole fruit instead – it's more filling and has the added benefit of fibre.

Explore the Australian Dietary Guidelines for discretionary food and drinks

Ways to have less

When it comes to your health, you'll be better off limiting how many sugary drinks you drink.



Some healthier options to consider in place of sugary drinks include:

- water
- unsweetened iced tea
- plain milk
- sparkling water with a splash of juice
- a glass (250 mL) of 100% fruit juice diluted 50:50 with water.

Sometimes diet soft drinks can be an option and they are better for you than the full-sugar variety. But treat these more like a halfway point for someone trying to cut back on sugary drinks. Because of their acidity, they can still contribute to tooth decay.

When to see a dietitian

If you're wanting to have less sugar and sugary drinks in your diet, an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help you.

We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- are struggling with making dietary changes to have less sugary drinks
- need nutritional advice to help ensure you're meeting your individual nutrient requirements
- would like personalised advice and support from a professional
- have specific nutritional needs, such as during pregnancy or for children.

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They can help you with personalised, easy-to-follow and evidence-based advice.

APDs are Australia's most trusted dietetics professionals.

Find a dietitian

Top tips

- Make your own fruit or herbal infused sparkling water.
- Aim to drink more water (fluoridated tap water is the best and cheapest option); that will reduce the thirst craving for a sugary drink.
- If you do have a sugar craving, make whole fruit your first choice rather than a sugary drink.
- If you do go for a sugary drink, choose the smallest serving size and don’t keep large bottles at home.

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in July 2022.