

Are Diet Beverages Acceptable?

Hospitals Adopt Healthier Beverage Policies

Many hospitals are implementing healthier beverage policies, replacing sugary drinks with healthier options in their vending machines, fountains, catering and other areas. Tap water and unsweetened low-fat/nonfat milk are the healthiest replacements for sugary drinks and contribute to the body's daily nutrient needs. Unsweetened coffee and tea, and 100 percent fruit or vegetable juices (in appropriate serving sizes with moderate sodium content, if applicable) also rank high as healthy beverage options.

In developing healthier beverage policies, the question of whether to include beverages sweetened with artificial or non-caloric sweeteners comes up. Some hospitals include these "diet drinks" in their healthier beverage options, based on their desire to offer a wide range of options and their belief that "diet drinks" are preferable to sugary beverages in terms of calories and carbohydrate intake.

While federal regulations allow the use of artificial sweeteners, there is no conclusive research to say whether diet drinks and artificial sweeteners are safe to consume or what, if any, influence they have on obesity and chronic diseases. Switching from sugary beverages to diet drinks may reduce calorie consumption and contribute to short-term weight loss. But calorie consumption is not the only concern, and more research is needed.

What Are Artificial Sweeteners?

The term "artificial sweeteners" refers to all substances, including those derived from stevia or sugar alcohols, added to food and drinks to make them taste sweeter, without adding other nutrients or calories (or only a few calories). Some experts also refer to these as "non-nutritive sweeteners" or low calorie or non-caloric sweeteners. Most artificial sweeteners have a higher intensity of sweetness per gram compared to sugar, offering roughly 150 to more than 600 times the sweetness of sugar with no or few calories. Artificial sweeteners are used in "diet" and other beverages and food products to reduce the number of calories and carbohydrates in these products.

How Are Artificial Sweeteners Regulated?

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulates substances added to foods and beverages – including artificial sweeteners – through food additive regulations. The FDA has issued food additive regulations for at least seven artificial sweeteners. The regulations specify how these substances may be used, including in what types of food, in what quantities and for what uses.

The FDA also allows substances that are "generally recognized as safe" (GRAS) to be used in food. More than a dozen companies have submitted notices to the FDA that stevia-based sweeteners are GRAS, and the FDA has not questioned these determinations.

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS WITH FOOD ADDITIVE REGULATIONS

- acesulfame-potassium
- advantame
- aspartame
- neotame
- saccharin
- sucralose
- steviol glycoside (stevia)

Do Diet Drinks Really Help You Lose Weight?

Research consistently has shown, and most authorities agree, that individuals who switch from sugary to artificially sweetened drinks do reduce their calorie intake from beverages. However, some research also shows that individuals drinking artificially sweetened beverages may consume many additional calories through other food and beverages, ultimately nullifying the overall calorie reduction achieved by drinking a "diet" beverage.

A growing body of research suggests that drinking beverages with artificial sweeteners actually may be detrimental to reducing preferences for sugary foods. Sweet cravings are natural and the amplified sweet taste of artificially sweetened beverages may increase a person's inclination for sugary and sweet-tasting foods or beverages over time, potentially undermining weight loss efforts.



What You Drink Makes a Difference

Are Any Health Risks Associated with Using Artificial Sweeteners?

The National Cancer Institute has stated that it has “no clear evidence” of a link between artificial sweeteners available in the U.S. and the risk of cancer. In 2012, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics said that consumers can “safely enjoy” a range of nutritive and non-nutritive sweeteners within an eating plan that follows federal nutritional recommendations, such as the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Dietary Reference Intakes. Research is mixed about a potential link between artificial sweeteners and the risk of certain chronic diseases.

Is It Safe for Children to Consume Artificial Sweeteners?

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Healthy Eating Research Program convened an expert panel to develop a set of healthy beverage guidelines. These guidelines do not recommend beverages with added sweeteners (whether caloric or non-caloric) for children under 14 years old. For older youth, the only consensus is that water and milk continue to be the best healthy options.

The Institute of Medicine’s recommended standards for foods and beverages sold or served in schools include artificially sweetened beverages as an option only for high school-aged youth, after the school day ends.

U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations do not allow drinks with added sugars or artificially sweetened drinks to be sold in elementary and middle schools, or through the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. However, in a rule that took effect in July 2014, the U.S.D.A. does allow artificially sweetened beverages (within specified size and calorie limits) to be sold in high schools but not as part of national school meal programs.

States may pass their own school food regulations that are more restrictive than federal law.

What Is the Best Approach?

The healthiest beverage choices continue to be water and low- and nonfat milk. Although the federal government and expert panels have deemed some artificial sweeteners safe from a food safety perspective, the science is not conclusive when it comes to other health impacts from drinking artificially sweetened beverages. When it comes to sugary beverages, the science is clear that they have contributed to the obesity epidemic and also are linked with serious chronic diseases including diabetes and heart disease.

USDA Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Start simple with MyPlate

Make Better Beverage Choices

At every age, what you drink can be as important as what you eat. When deciding what to drink, choose options that are full of nutrients and limited in added sugars, saturated fat, and sodium. Start simple with these tips today:

- Drink water**
Drink water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages. Regular soda, energy or sports drinks, and other sweetened drinks usually contain a lot of added sugars.
- Encourage kid-friendly drinks**
Make water, low-fat or fat-free dairy milk, or unsweetened seltzer the go-to options for your kids. Serve 100% juice only on occasion.
- Compare food labels**
Use the Nutrition Facts label when shopping for beverages. Check and compare calories, amounts of added sugars, and servings per containers.
- Cut coffee calories**
Skip the whipped cream and chocolate or caramel drizzle. Go with low-fat milk and a sprinkle of cinnamon or nutmeg for a lower calorie coffee.
- Grab a bottle on the go**
Carry a clean, reusable water bottle in your bag to fill up throughout the day. Tap water is usually easy to find.
- Jazz up your drink**
Perk up your plain water or seltzer water with lemon, lime, or orange slices. Maybe even try some fresh mint leaves or a few fresh or frozen berries.

DGA Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity
Go to MyPlate.gov for more information. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

The benefits of healthy eating add up over time, bite by bite.

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What Approach Should Hospitals Use to Develop a Healthier Beverage Policy?

Hospitals can choose from a variety of approaches. Most hospitals continue to offer artificially sweetened drinks, but do not include them in the “healthy” beverage category. Another option is to continue to offer artificially sweetened beverages in certain outlets such as cafeterias, but perhaps not in vending machines or gift stores. A number of hospitals use a “red, yellow and green” labeling system that includes artificially sweetened beverages as a “yellow” option in all outlets, and may give these products less favorable pricing or placement compared to “green” options such as water or unsweet-ened milk.

A hospital could choose to not sell beverages with artificial sweeteners and focus only on healthy offerings, such as tap water, infused water, bottled water, carbonated waters, low- and nonfat milk, 100 percent juices and unsweetened coffee and teas. Hospitals should consider their culture and the dynamics of the institution in deciding on a “healthier beverage” policy.

The Kansas Hospital Association and Healthworks have created a series of resources designed to inform and support efforts to promote healthy food and beverage environments in Kansas hospitals. The Public Health Law Center assisted in creating this document. These resources are funded in part by the Kansas Health Foundation. For more information, visit www.HealthyKansasHospitals.org.

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