

Healthy Beverages in Healthcare

About Us

The Nutrition in Healthcare Leadership Team (NHLT) is a subcommittee of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative (Initiative), a project facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners. The NHLT is comprised of food service, sustainability, community benefits, and government affairs professionals from the healthcare sector representing 22 local hospitals. These healthcare professionals are dedicated to promoting optimal health in San Diego County by serving fresh, healthy, affordable foods and beverages produced in a manner that supports the local economy, environment, and community. Recognizing growing concerns about sugar-sweetened beverage consumption, the NHLT set “making healthy beverages the standard [in healthcare]” as one of its key goals.

Problem Statement

Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are beverages that contain caloric sweeteners and are also known as sugar-loaded drinks.¹ These drinks are the largest single source of added sugar in the diet of American youth² and play a significant role in driving current obesity trends, not to mention tooth decay.³ In San Diego County, 34.8% of children, 63.1% of adolescents (ages 12 to 17), and 21.1% of adults drink one or more sodas per day.⁴ Studies show that the risk of childhood obesity increases with every additional daily serving of soda.⁵ And 34.5% of San Diego County’s children are overweight or obese.⁶ With over one-third of our community’s children already facing overweight or obesity, the consumption of SSBs is of grave concern to our healthcare providers.



Solution

In order to make healthy beverages the standard, the NHLT created a common healthy beverage definition. By collaborating on these standards, members can more effectively communicate their preference for healthy beverages to vendors and the community and better leverage their purchasing power to increase healthy beverage options.

To create its healthy beverage definition and standard, the NHLT conducted a scan of local and national healthy beverage standards. The NHLT reviewed research, journal articles, and evidence-based best practices from leading academic, public health, and healthcare institutions. Much of the final model was based on the Rady Children’s Hospital “Re-think Your Drink” Campaign, which encompassed many of these best practices and had also been established through research and critical examination of nationally distinguished resources.⁷ The NHLT’s final standard varies only slightly from Rady Children’s Hospital’s model, and is consistent with the goals of “Share the Care,” a dental health initiative of San Diego County’s Health and Human Services Agency⁸ and the Initiative’s “5210 Every Day!” campaign message of “0” sugary drinks. Furthermore, the Initiative has adopted the definition throughout its 7 domains to support its overarching strategy of reducing SSB consumption. Each beverage category was discussed in depth based on the available resources and the following consensus was achieved and formatted into the popular red/yellow/green beverage choice model:

Adults	Children
RED - Beverages that are high in added sugar (12 g of added sugar per 12 oz) and should be avoided. Do not sip these beverages over a long period of time, as tooth decay is a problem with ongoing exposure to sugar and/or acid. ⁹	
Stop! Drink rarely, if at all.	Stop! Don't drink.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular soda Energy or sports drinks* Fruit drinks** 100% fruit juice (over 8 oz) Flavored milk and whole milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular soda Energy or sports drinks* Fruit drinks** 100% fruit juice (over 4 oz) Flavored milk and whole milk (ages 2 and up)
YELLOW - Beverages with low added sugar (6 – 12 g of added sugar per 12 oz) and/or artificial sweeteners.*** Drinks in this category are considered transitional. Do not sip these beverages over a long period of time, as tooth decay is a problem with ongoing exposure to sugar and/or acid. ⁹	
Caution! Drink occasionally.	Caution! Drink once or twice a week, if at all.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diet soda*** Low calorie, low sugar drinks 100% fruit juice (8 oz or less, 4 oz or less is best) Unflavored 2% milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diet soda*** Low calorie, low sugar drinks 100% fruit juice (4 oz or less) Unflavored 2% milk
GREEN - Beverages with no added sugar (0 to 5 g of naturally occurring sugar per 12 oz) and no artificial sweeteners should be the primary beverage of choice. Coffee, tea, and water with added fruit may be acidic in some situations. Do not sip acidic beverages over a long period of time as prolonged exposure to teeth is associated with tooth decay. ⁹	
Go! Drink plenty.	Go! Drink plenty.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water and seltzer water Water with added fruit Unflavored skim or 1% milk (2-3 8 oz portions a day****) Unsweetened tea and coffee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Water Water with added fruit Unflavored skim or 1% milk (2-3 8 oz portions a day****) Unsweetened decaf coffee or herbal tea

*Energy or sports drinks include drinks containing a high amount of caffeine or stimulants, electrolyte replacement beverages, etc.

**Fruit drinks include fruit smoothies and fruit-flavored beverages containing a high amount of added sugar.

***The NHLT does not encourage the consumption of artificial sweeteners.

****Low-fat (1%) and skim milk contain natural sugars and healthy nutrients but should be limited to 2-3 8 oz portions a day. Children under age 2 should consume only whole milk.

Evidence Base

Water	General recommendations for daily water intake are between half an ounce and an ounce of water for each pound a person weighs. ¹⁰ The exact number of ounces a person should consume can vary based on the individual's physical activity level and respective climate. In the Natural Resources Defense Council's four year study of bottled water, researchers found that bottled water sold in the United States was not necessarily cleaner or safer than most tap water, as tap water is more strictly regulated. ¹¹ In addition, unlike fluoridated tap water, most bottled water does not contain an adequate amount of fluoride to fight tooth decay. ¹² Finally, tap water is an affordable beverage option and uses fewer resources in comparison to bottled beverages. ^{13, 14}
Milk	Milk is a key source of calcium, vitamin D, protein, and other essential micronutrients; however, leading public health institutions recommend adults and children consume at most two to three 8 oz portions of milk per day. ¹⁵ The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends that preschool children consume 2 cups of milk per day, children ages 4-8 consume 2-2.5 cups of milk and milk products per day, and that all other age groups consume 3 cups. ¹⁶ While the IOM recommends fat-free (plain or flavored) and plain low-fat milk only, ¹⁷ the USDA does not support allowing low-fat flavored milk. ¹⁸ The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation does not recommend flavored milk as a healthier beverage but states that if offered to older children, it should be nonfat or low-fat, with no more than 130 calories per 8 oz serving. ¹⁹
Juice	"Although 100% fruit juice can be part of a healthful diet, it lacks dietary fiber and when consumed in excess can contribute extra calories." ¹⁶ Due to the high number of calories and large amount of naturally occurring sugar, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recommends adults consume no more than 8 oz of 100% fruit or vegetable juice or fruit juice combined with water daily. ¹⁹ These guidelines also recommend that the majority of fruit consumed comes from whole fruit rather than fruit juice. ¹⁹
Diet Soda	Diet soda and artificial sweeteners currently lie in the gray area of research. The FDA has established acceptable daily intakes for each artificial sweetener that are 100x less than the smallest amount that may cause health concerns. ²² When sugar substitutes are used for higher-energy foods and beverages, they can decrease energy and carbohydrate intake and help manage blood glucose and body weight, especially as an alternative to sugar if an individual has diabetes. ²¹ While diet soda can be a useful transitional step away from sugar-sweetened beverages, long-term consumption is discouraged. ¹ Studies have shown that its high level of sweetness can increase consumer preference for sugary foods and drinks. ¹ There is also major concern, supported by some studies that artificial sweeteners disrupt the body's ability to gauge how many calories are being ingested, thereby causing weight gain. ^{20,21,22,23}
Sports Drinks, Electrolyte Replacement Drinks, and Vitamin Waters	Sports drinks and electrolyte replacement drinks can be healthy options for people participating in vigorous physical activity for one or more hours, such as endurance events. ²⁴ For most people, regular food intake is sufficient to replace electrolytes lost during moderate physical activity. ²⁴ Likewise, vitamin waters are a source of added sugars and are unnecessary if one stays hydrated and consumes a balanced diet. ²⁴ In addition, the acidic content of sports drinks can erode tooth surfaces, hastening tooth decay. ²⁵ The USDA recommends that most adults consume few or no such drinks. ¹⁶

Citations

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