

Diet sodas and drinking calories ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've always heard "Don't drink your calories away." But now there are beverages like Coca-Cola Zero, said to contain zero calories and zero sugar. In that case, should I still be worried about limiting my intake of these drinks?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Unfortunately, whoever said the good things in life are free was not referring to diet soft drinks and beverages. Although these refreshments are sugar- and calorie-free, they can still do some serious damage to your teeth and possibly your waistline.

The acid in colas, even diet varieties, can help form plaque and soften the teeth's enamel (the hard outer covering). This in turn makes the teeth more susceptible to tooth decay and cavities, which can interfere with eating and cause oral sensitivity, pain, and infections. Drinking sodas from a straw or when eating a full meal will help combat the corrosion caused by the acid, as will brushing your teeth afterwards or chewing sugar-free gum.

Even though these drinks aren't adding any calories to your diet, recent studies on both human and animal subjects have shown that they may actually contribute to weight gain. Some researchers speculate that the sweet taste of soda may trick the body into thinking that it is going to get the calories associated with sugars. When the calories aren't delivered, the body stimulates the appetite, making you hungrier than if you had not had the soda. This may cause you to indulge in extra calories in other foods.

Other scientists have a different theory: the sweetness of the soft drink, coupled with the lack of calories, tricks the body into believing that all sweet foods have little or no calories. This mixed message interferes with your body's ability to interpret internal cues that regulate how much of a certain food or food group should be consumed. This bodily confusion, they believe, may then lead to over-eating.

The weight gain linked to diet sodas may also be attributed to certain behavioral patterns. Some people may mistakenly regard diet sodas as a diet and only switch from drinking regular sodas to diet sodas in order to lose weight. But, because they don't change any other aspect of their eating or exercising habits, they continue to gain weight and eventually become overweight or obese.

Does this mean you should swear off diet sodas forever? Certainly not, but moderation is a good idea. If you're currently drinking several cans or bottles of soda a day, it may be best to gradually replace your sodas with a healthier choice, such as water or milk. Although quitting cold turkey is better for you than large volumes of diet soda, you may find it easier to adjust to and keep your new habit if the switch is gradual. You can also check out [Getting off colas, sodas, pop, fizz,... oh, whatever](#) [2] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives for more tips on forfeiting the fizz.

Alice!

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