Dear Alice,

I read on someone’s blog about drinking seltzer water if you’re trying to quit drinking soft drinks but still need that fizz. Are there any good/bad side effects to drinking seltzer water?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Did you hear about the person who got hit in the head with a soda can? Lucky for them, it was just a “soft” drink! Even so, there’s nothing soft about the punch sodas pack. Due to its sugar and caffeine content, drinking soda may increase the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions. So, making the switch to seltzer water — one of several kinds of carbonated water — is indeed a step in a lower-risk direction. While it may have an effect on tooth enamel, seltzer water can still be a more nutritious choice than soda. Read on for more about different types of carbonated water and their effects!

Seltzer water, sparkling mineral water, club soda, and tonic water are all types of water carbonated with carbon dioxide, which gives them a fizzy quality that appeals to many soda-lovers. However, these waters vary in how they’re processed and with what compounds. Seltzer water is artificially carbonated with carbon dioxide during manufacturing and doesn’t contain any other minerals. Sparkling mineral water, on the other hand, goes through the carbonation process naturally in a spring or well. Spring water naturally contains a variety of minerals (such as sodium, magnesium and calcium), although the amounts vary based on the origin of the water. Another fizzy alternative, club soda, is created through a carbonation process similar to that of seltzer water, but also involves the infusion of certain minerals such as potassium sulfate, sodium chloride, and sodium bicarbonate. Finally, tonic water is made just like club soda, but with the addition of quinine (a compound isolated from the bark of cinchona trees that gives tonic water a bitter taste) and oftentimes sugar. While these waters seem may appear to be a viable alternative to soda, many companies add sodium, sugars, citric acids, and flavors to their carbonated water (most often to tonic water) in production. As a result, some drinks marketed as carbonated water actually wind up having as many calories as an equivalent amount of soda, if that’s of concern. For example, club soda generally doesn't have any calories, while tonic water often does! Reading the nutrition label on these drinks can help to determine what’s inside the
It’s also good to note that these beverages are still somewhat acidic and therefore may contribute to dental erosion (the chemical dissolution of tooth structure resulting from an absence of bacteria in an acidic environment). Research shows that teeth erode in a pH of 2.0 to 4.0 (a range in which many common carbonated waters fall), and that surface enamel starts to demineralize as the pH drops to less than 5.5. Because it’s not realistic to check the pH levels of every carbonated water you drink, it can be informative to read nutrition labels to get a sense of whether your drink has added sugars, sodium, or carbohydrates.

Given that carbonated waters differ depending on their type and other ingredients added during manufacturing, it’s difficult to generalize the effects of consumption. Additionally, while there is a great deal of research on soda consumption, there isn’t as much research about the effects of drinking carbonated water. That being said, drinking carbonated water that doesn’t have added sugars, sodium, or carbohydrates may be a hydrating choice without the nutritional profile of soda. As you start investigating, you may get a better sense of which companies produce carbonated water that fits into the lifestyle you’re working toward achieving.

In fizz and good fortune,

Alice!

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