Dear Cokehead,

I drink a lot of soda in my diet and I want to stop. Can you tell me some of the problems that drinking soda can cause, and some tips on how to stop?

— Cokehead

Answer

Dear Cokehead,

Drinking too much of the bubbly? It’s not clear if you’re a regular or diet soda drinker, but regular soda is a source of sugar, caffeine, sometimes coloring, and little else. One twelve-ounce can of regular soda typically contains eight teaspoons of sugar and 130 calories — but zero nutritional content. The American Heart Association recommends that individuals assigned male at birth limit their added sugar intake to nine teaspoons (or 150 calories) per day and individuals assigned female at birth consume no more than six teaspoons (or 100 calories) of added sugar per day. Drinking soda regularly may have some negative health consequences, but the good news is that by taking small steps you can be on your way to soda-free!

Soda mostly consists of empty calories. That is, it provides little other nutritious, good-for-you stuff — just calories and carbohydrates. Although these carbs can be used by the body for energy, if consumed in excess, sugar and carbs may contribute to weight gain. Additional health risks associated with soda consumption include:

- **Type 2 diabetes:** Studies have shown that daily consumption of sugary drinks can increase risk of type 2 diabetes by over 25 percent.
- **Kidney stones:** Sugary drinks have been tied to a higher risk of kidney stone formation, while other drinks, like coffee, wine, beer, tea, and juice can decrease this risk.
- **Heart disease:** A study that followed adults for twenty years showed that those who had a sugary drink every day were more likely to have a heart attack or heart disease.
- **Gout:** Daily soda drinkers are 75 percent more likely to develop gout than their non-soda consuming peers.
- **Cavities and tooth decay:** Enamel is the thin, outer layer of hard tissue that helps
maintain the tooth's shape and structure. Acid and sugar from the soda may wear down tooth enamel and cause tooth decay.

- **Side effects associated with caffeine**: Certain sodas also contain caffeine, which has additional health risks. If you're bothered by headaches, restlessness, or anxiety, you may want to take a closer look at just how much caffeine you consume in a typical day. One twelve-ounce can of soda contains about half the amount of caffeine as a cup of coffee.

In terms of "quitting" soda, going cold turkey may be difficult. You might start by cutting down on the amount of soda you drink each day. After a few weeks try to gradually reduce your intake until you aren't drinking any soda. Through the first few weeks, you may experience headaches, lethargy, or simply feeling the "blues"; all of these are typical reactions to cutting back. It's possible to feel better, both physically and mentally, after an initial period of adjustment. You can even make it a fun challenge by doing it with a friend! Keeping a journal of your soda consumption is helpful for keeping track of how much soda you're actually drinking.

As you transition off soda, it may be helpful to keep alternative beverages around, like water or seltzer to help quench your cravings. That way, if you're thirsty you're not tempted to go to the nearest store or vending machine. Here are some alternatives to try:

- Seltzer with a little unsweetened cranberry or grape juice
- Unsweetened, non-caloric flavored seltzers
- Plain tap water with lemon juice and an optional one to two teaspoons of sugar

Making changes to your diet isn't always easy, but kudos to you for taking the first step towards a healthier you!

Alice!

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- Eating healthy at the campus dining hall?
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