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Drink Up And Be Savvy

By Sally Squires

It's not just food that is adding unwanted pounds.

About half the excess calories consumed by Americans come from beverages. Liquid calories account for 20 percent of the caloric intake of those aged 2 and older, according to research conducted at the University of North Carolina. At least half come from sweetened beverages, such as juice and soft drinks, whose consumption has climbed threefold, from an average of 50 calories per day in 1977 to nearly 150 calories per day in 2001. That's enough to pile on about 15 pounds per year.

In addressing the obesity epidemic, "we have not been doing this right by focusing so much attention just on food," notes Barry M. Popkin, director of the Interdisciplinary Obesity Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and lead author of a new beverage "guidance system" developed by a team of experts from six universities. "We need to highlight beverages and their effect on weight."

Extra calories in beverages aren't the only problem. Numerous studies of hunger and satiety show that the brain doesn't register the calories that are imbibed as accurately as those that are chewed. Why that is so is not yet understood. But the end result is that liquid calories are less satisfying and can lead to consumption of more calories.

To help consumers make better choices, the new system ranks popular beverages on a scale of one (best) to six (worst), based on their nutritional punch. It was developed by Popkin and researchers at the University of Connecticut, the Harvard School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, Oregon State University, the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge, La., and funded in part by the makers of Lipton Tea:

Start with water. Tap, bottled, sparkling, vitamin-enhanced or flavored all rate as top choices. Water-filled food and drinks -- including fruit and vegetables, soups and stews, coffee and tea -- count toward the nine to 13 cups needed per day. Water can also provide some essential minerals, including calcium, magnesium and fluoride. While much has recently been made of the dangers of over-hydration, Popkin and his team conclude that this serious condition occurs "only in exceptional circumstances," or about one in every 1,000 ultra-endurance athletes.

Coffee or tea? These two popular beverages snagged a spot just below water based on strong evidence for health benefits of moderate consumption. Among the biggest benefits: reduced risk of type 2 diabetes among those who drink coffee, whether regular or decaffeinated. Other possible benefits: reduced risk of Parkinson's disease for men (but not women) who drink coffee. The downside: Coffee can raise blood pressure slightly and appears to increase homocysteine levels, which are linked to higher heart disease risk. Skip espresso or unfiltered boiled coffee since both seem to boost low-density lipoprotein (LDL), a damaging type of blood cholesterol.

Increased immunity is one of tea's benefits. Others appear to be better bone density, decreased risk of kidney stones and less tooth decay. Three or more cups of black tea daily may modestly cut the risk of heart attacks, the team concludes.

With either tea or coffee, go easy on the cream and sugar. One small study found that women who drank gourmet coffee with the works consumed an extra 206 calories daily compared with those who didn't.

Get milk. Just be sure to make it nonfat or 1 percent to keep calories low and to skip the saturated fat found in 2 percent and whole milk. Milk provides bone-preserving calcium and vitamin D. It's also "an excellent source of high-quality protein," the Popkin team notes in this month's American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. Milk also appears to reduce the risk of the metabolic syndrome, which hikes the risk of both heart disease and diabetes. Nonfat or very-low-fat soy milk fortified with calcium is a good alternative, the team concludes, though soy milk is not usually fortified with vitamin D. Federal dietary guidelines advise drinking three eight-ounce glasses per day of nonfat or 1 percent milk.

Try diet drinks. Sweetened with sugar substitutes, these beverages contain few calories and thus can help trim pounds when they're substituted for higher-calorie drinks. Caveat: The sweet taste may contribute to sweet preference in food and drink, the team found.

Go easy on the juice, sports drinks and alcohol. They "have very limited nutritional benefits," Popkin says, and are high in calories. One exception: vegetable juice. The dietary guidelines urge eating fruit first rather than drinking juice. They also advise no more than two alcoholic drinks daily for men, one for women (none for those who are pregnant.) Find more information on calories in alcoholic beverages at <http://www.leanplateclub.com/> .

Skip the soft drinks. They're the type of beverage "least recommended" by Popkin's team, because they're high in calories and have "no or very small amounts of other nutrients." .