

By Elizabeth George MD

This article will be short, but not sweet. Did you know that if a child drinks a can of soda a daily, he is consuming 140 empty (non-nutritious) calories a day? If he goes for a 16-minute jog, he might burn that off, but if he sits and plays a computer game, those extra calories are going to end up in excess weight gain.

Just 100 extra calories produce 12 extra pounds a year – stored as fatty tissue under the skin and around the organs, including streaks of fat in the liver. Fifteen years ago in Mercersburg it was rare to see a 10-year-old weighing over 150pounds – (that’s more than most adult females should weigh) – but now it is not uncommon. By teenage years, these children face a very high risk of diabetes and high blood pressure. This obesity epidemic is occurring in towns across the country. As of 2004, 19% of 6- to 11-year-old American kids were obese, up from just 4% in 1971.

Type 2 diabetes affects about 17 million U.S. individuals. The prevalence of diabetes has increased rapidly during the last decades in parallel to the obesity epidemic. Coinciding with the increasing prevalence of obesity and type 2 diabetes, soft drink consumption has more than doubled from 1977 to 1998.

Studies show that a higher consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages – such as soft drinks, fruit punch, juice “drinks,” or sweetened tea – is associated with greater weight gain and an increased risk for development of diabetes. These highly sweetened beverages contain large amounts of high-fructose corn syrup, providing excessive calories and large amounts of rapidly absorbable sugars. They induce a fast and dramatic increase in both glucose and insulin levels in the body; in other words, they have a “high glycemic index.”

Liquids have a lower capability of producing “satiety” – the body’s “I’ve had enough food” signal. So the excess of calories in sodas is not always balanced by a decrease in amount of solid food intake; a positive caloric balance results, causing weight gain and obesity. Couple this with the high caloric foods that people tend to consume along with soda, such as cheese burgers, large size French fries, chips and Debbie cakes, and we really have an excess calorie problem. All of these foods stimulate taste buds that crave salt and sugar. The bad news is, salt just stimulates more thirst, and the concentrated sweets and processed starches stimulate the appetite because of the insulin surge they produce.

What’s the answer?

– The Tuscarora school district has a Health and Wellness Policy that has eliminated nonnutritive drinks from the schools. Support this policy by doing the same at home. – Don’t get your toddlers and children started on the soda habit. Set the example by not routinely drinking sodas yourself. Limit sodas to just now and then – like when you go to a Steeler’s game or to an amusement park.

Create some new habits over the next 21 days:

– When you're thirsty, DRINK WATER; get up and walk to the water fountain or sink for a glass of water, rather than carrying that bottle of soda around with you.

– Can't give up that fizzy stuff right away? Try 3 oz. of 100% fruit juice (not punch or juice drink – there should be NO corn fructose on the label) with 6 oz. seltzer water (just 40 calories, plus some nutrients).

– Replace soda at meals with water or low fat/skim milk or soymilk; growing bones need the calcium and Vitamin D found in milk.

– Brew your own green, white, black tea, and add just 1/2 tsp of sugar (or none) when you pour your cup or glass.

– Replace a soda snack with an apple – more filling, more nutrients and half the calories.

What could this mean for you? If you have a sweet drink habit and replace one 12 oz. drink a day with water, and stick to it, you could lose 18 pounds in a year. Put on some fast music and dance and laugh with your kids for 20 minutes everyday, and say "good bye" to 12 more pounds!