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Sports Drinks

There are always two sides to every story—unless you watched *Lost* where there seemed to be dozens. In this message, I'm going to give you an upside and downside to sports drinks. These are the types of drinks heavily promoted at every sporting event on television—not energy drinks, which contain B vitamins, caffeine, and sometimes herbs. Sports drinks contain a weak sugar solution and electrolytes such as sodium and potassium; mostly, they contain water, which is what the body absolutely needs.

Sports Drinks and Teenagers

I don't think any company markets to teenagers who watch sports more than sports-drink companies. What many parents may not realize is that sports drinks contain a lot of sugar—up to 225 calories in a 32-ounce bottle. The sugar is a problem because sugary drinks have long been linked to the increase in childhood obesity, and most teenagers don't need the calories.

In a study published in late September, researchers in Texas reported the results of a questionnaire administered to 8th and 11th graders that examined eating, drinking, and exercise habits (1). Researchers reported that while sugary sodas are often thought to be the caloric culprit, sugar-laden sports drinks actually comprise just as significant a source of sugar, especially for teenage boys. They reported that 57% of all boys and 46% of all girls drank two or more 12-ounce servings of sugar-laden drinks every day—either soda or sports drinks—and that's a whopping 160 to 240 calories from sugar. Even more of a concern was that 35% of all boys and 22% of all girls drank three or more servings of these sugary drinks per day, and that's 240 to 360 calories.

What's even more important was that as the servings per day increased for boys and girls, the physical activity from exercise decreased and hours in sedentary activities such as watching television, playing or working on computers, and playing video games all increased. Obviously, somebody's missing the point of a sports drink—the increased sugar intake wasn't being burned off with corresponding activity. And the increased sugar intake also seemed to be related to other poor health behaviors; as the number of sugary drinks increased, unhealthy food choices such as fried foods and desserts increased for both boys and girls.

The researchers stated that unless teens are exercising more than 90 minutes per day, these sugary drinks aren't necessary; plain water is often all they need unless it's hot and humid. Research shows that teens are more likely to choose flavored drinks rather than plain water. Providing teenagers with sugar-free drinks is a healthier alternative so they can quench their thirst without increasing their sugar intake. It may help with other food choices as well.

Muscle Cramps and Constipation

I get asked about both of these issues a lot: muscle cramps in the middle of the night or constipation just about any time. You may wonder what sports drinks have to do with those two problems. Both conditions are brought about by the same thing: lack of fluid intake and lack of electrolytes such as sodium and potassium. What do sports drinks have plenty of? Fluids and electrolytes.

For muscle cramps, lack of fluids is the primary cause with electrolytes a close second. For muscles, sodium and potassium are critical but so are calcium and magnesium. Most quality supplements have calcium and

magnesium together. Take about 12 ounces of a sports drink with a calcium-magnesium supplement in the morning and repeat in the evening. Fortunately there are sugar-free sports drinks available so you won't get the extra calories if you don't want them, and they work just as well as the sugary kind.

When it comes to constipation, the critical factor is fluids in a specific place: your gut. Take 16-ounce sugar-free sports drink, add one-quarter teaspoon of sea salt, and one teaspoon of soluble fiber; adding a low-calorie flavoring such as lemon or lime can make it tastier. Mix it until the salt disappears. Drink about 4 to 8 ounces before bed or spread it throughout the day—2 ounces here and 2 ounces there—and everything should come out just fine the next day. Obviously, if you have hypertension or are watching your sodium intake, that might not be a viable option, but for the rest of us, it really works. The great thing is that you can use this mix whenever you need it; no need to worry about overdoing it as you can with laxatives.

If a sluggish digestive system is a continuing problem, you probably need to adjust your diet—more fruit and veggies and popcorn and fewer high-fat foods such as cheese and deep-fried anything. But when your body needs a little help, this is a safe way to get things going.

The Bottom Line

As I said when I began, everything has an upside and a downside. In the case of sports drinks, they're good when used properly—it's when they're not used as they should that problems arise. That's just about the same for everything we eat or drink. Just enough and no more. And as with almost any food, the lowest-calorie option is the best choice.

What are you prepared to do today?TM

Dr. Chet

Reference: Pediatrics 2010;125:e754-e761

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