

## Help for Soda Lovers What to do when you're a softie for soft drinks

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Catherine Gregorczyk says she's an addict -- a soda addict, that is.

"It's hard going out with friends who are more health-conscious than I am and who drink water all the time when all I ever want is a Coke," says Gregorczyk, 22, a recent Purdue University graduate.

Gregorczyk says she even had "a bit of a panic attack" while in Europe last summer, because her beloved Coke is harder to find in some countries "and is way more expensive." She was happy to pay the extra price, though, for the "sugar boost" soda gives her. But is Gregorczyk really *addicted* to sodas? Not in the clinical sense, says Elisabetta Politi, MPH, RD, CDE, nutrition manager of the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center.

Liz Marr, MS, RD, agrees. "People have an affinity for certain foods, and they develop food habits, but that's not the same thing as an addiction," says Marr, a principal with Marr Barr Communications, a Colorado-based public relations firm specializing in nutrition and health issues.

Still, soda lovers will testify that it can be awfully hard to give up the fizzy stuff. One reason is that when we consume something sweet, the taste triggers our brains to release chemicals called opioids -- which make us crave more pleasurable tastes, says Politi.

So why would anyone *want* to swear off soft drinks? Experts say that, while soda has few useful nutrients, it is among the many sources of excess calories contributing to the U.S. obesity epidemic. Several recent studies bear out the idea that drinking too many sodas can affect your health:

- Research presented at an American Diabetes Association gathering this summer found that women who went from drinking less than one, non-diet soda a day to one or more daily sodas were nearly twice as likely to develop type 2 diabetes over a four-year period as women who drank less than one soft drink a day. (The women who drank more soda also gained more weight over the same period.)
- A study published in the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* suggested that fructose, a sweetener found naturally in fruit juice and typically used in concentrated amounts in soft drinks, may induce a hormonal response in the body that promotes weight gain.
- Soft drinks, especially light-colored drinks, and canned iced tea appear to "aggressively" erode teeth enamel in laboratory tests -- and it didn't matter whether they were diet drinks

or regular ones, according to a study published in *General Dentistry*.

All this is important because soda is a significant part of the American diet. Of the \$80-billion-a-year beverage industry in the U.S., \$64 billion is spent on carbonated soft drinks, says John Sicher, editor and publisher of *Beverage Digest*. Regular soda accounts for 72.6% of those sales; diet soda for 27.4%.

Sales of diet soda have been on the rise in the last few years, says Sicher. But growing even more quickly are bottled waters and sports drinks, he says, observing that consumers are looking for beverages that fit in with their health goals.

### No Need to Go Cold Turkey

Soda is certainly not an ideal drink from a health standpoint -- it offers no nutritional value and can be high in sugar, sodium, and caffeine. But the good news, experts say, is that if you truly love it, there's no need to give it up completely.

If you generally watch what you eat and are reasonably active, a soda or two a day isn't going to derail your efforts, says Tavis Piattoly, RD, director of performance enhancement at Ochsner Clinic's Elmwood Fitness Center in New Orleans.

But if you regularly drink two, three, or more cans a day, the added sugar can pile on the pounds "unless, of course, the soft drinks are planned into an overall diet of moderation, variety, and of course, exercise," says Dee Sandquist, RD, manager of nutrition and diabetes at the Southwest Washington Medical Center in Vancouver, Wash.

Keep in mind that when you're trying to adopt a healthier diet, it's not a good idea to completely deprive yourself of treats, Marr says.

"A very Spartan diet without some of your favorite foods is not sustainable," she says. "I encourage people to figure out how to include their favorite foods into their diet."

### Lower-Calorie Alternatives

To reach soda lovers who are reluctant to give up their favorite "fix," both Pepsi and Coca-Cola recently launched lower-calorie soft drinks. Pepsi's Edge and Coke's C2 are now in grocery stores across the country.

Both are touted as a lighter alternative to regular sodas, but with a truer cola taste than diet sodas. The drinks are made with both high-fructose corn syrup (the standard sweetener for regular soda) and Splenda, a no-calorie, no-carbohydrate sweetener.

While the sodas have fewer calories than regular soda, they are not no-cal. Pepsi, for example, says a 12-ounce can of Edge has 70 calories and 20 grams each of sugar and carbohydrates, compared with regular Pepsi's 150 calories and 41 grams each of sugar and carbohydrates.

The development of these sodas is the result of a "fundamental change" in the way people are drinking soft drinks, says Pepsi spokesperson Dave DeCecco. "More than 60 million people are drinking both regular and diet sodas," he says. "It just makes sense for us to give them what they're looking for."

## The Skinny on Diet Sodas

If you're trying to cut calories but don't want to give up soda altogether, switching either to the new lower-calorie sodas or to diet sodas is a good option, says Sandquist.

Extensive research has shown that the artificial sweeteners used in diet sodas are safe (except for people who have the metabolic disorder phenylketonuria or PKU, who should not consume aspartame).

But even with diet drinks, it's not a good idea to overdo. Researchers say that a new study, done in rats, suggests that artificial sweeteners might interfere with the body's natural ability to count calories based on a food's sweetness. This could make people who consume artificially sweetened items more likely to overindulge in other sweet foods and beverages, say the authors of the study, published in the International Journal of Obesity.

What if you simply don't like the taste of diet drinks? Here are some suggestions from people who have made the switch:

- Try different brands to see which you find most palatable.
- Serve it ice-cold.
- Try adding lemon or lime to spark up the flavor.
- Take it slow: Start out by pouring a small amount of diet soda into your glass of regular soda, then gradually increase the proportion of diet soda until you get used to the taste.

## Beyond Soda

Even better, try some non-soda alternatives. Water is the perfect no-calorie beverage, and you can dress it up by adding citrus slices or a sprig of mint. But when it just won't do, try:

- 100% fruit juices (while not necessarily lower in calories than soda, these contain important nutrients, Marr says).
- Nonfat milk, which will also give you a calcium boost.
- Unsweetened tea. Try green tea (which also contains potentially cancer-preventing phytonutrients) or herbal tea.
- Seltzer water with a splash of juice. Try orange, grapefruit, cranberry -- even mango or guava.
- Homemade lemonade -- made with lemon, water, and a small amount of sugar or artificial sweetener.
- Coffee, black or with skim milk and artificial sweetener. Try it iced in hot weather.

For more beverage ideas and recipes, check out "Recipe Doctor" Elaine Magee's [healthy suggestions](#).

## Making Better Choices

More important than eliminating soda, nutritionists say, is adding more nutritional choices to your diet.

"Soft drinks are bad for the diet only when they replace foods that contain beneficial nutrients," says Sandquist, who is also a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

And if you can't kick your "addiction," don't beat yourself up. Gregorczyk, for example, says she's striving for moderation, not perfection.

"I will never be able to go cold turkey," she says. "The most I've tried to force myself to do is cut back, so, for example, I'm currently trying to have no more than two Cokes a day.

"Eventually I would like to get down to one Coke a day, but I'm not sure how easy that will be. As long as I limit myself right now, I tell myself that I am heading a step in the right direction."

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SOURCES: Catherine Gregorczyk, intern, S&S Public Relations; Indianapolis. Tavis Piattoly, RD, Elmwood Fitness Center, New Orleans. John Sicher, editor, *Beverage Digest*, Bedford Hills, N.Y. Liz Marr, RD, Marr Barr Communications, Longmont, Colo. Elisabetta Politi, MPH, RD, CDE, Duke University Diet and Fitness Center, Durham, N.C. Dave DeCecco, spokesman, Pepsi-Cola Co., Purchase, N.Y. Dee Sandquist, RD, manager of nutrition and diabetes, Southwest Washington Medical Center, Vancouver, Wash. WebMD Medical News: "Soft Drink Sweetener May Raise Obesity Risks," by Jennifer Warner, published June 9, 2004; WebMD Medical News: "Sodas, Canned Teas Attack Tooth Enamel," by Jeanie Lerche Davis, published June 11, 2004; WebMD Medical News: "Sugary Sodas Add Pounds, Raise Diabetes Risk," by Jennifer Warner, published June 7, 2004; WebMD Weight Loss Clinic Feature: "The Truth on Artificial Sweeteners," by Carol Sorgen, published Jan. 30, 2004. WebMD Medical News: "Artificial Sweeteners May Damage Diet Efforts," by Jennifer Warner, published June 30, 2004. WebMD Weight Loss Clinic Feature: "Trying to Lose Weight? Watch What You Drink," by Carol Sorgen, published Oct. 3, 2003.