
Soda Consumption Fuels Obesity

By Suzanne Bohan

Health advocates hope 400,000 Bay Area residents will commit to enjoying this summer sipping fewer sodas, or none at all.

On Wednesday, public health leaders from six Bay Area counties gathered in Oakland to launch the area's first "Soda Free Summer" campaign.

Alameda County ran a successful "Soda Free Summer" pilot project last year, in which 42 percent of the participants polled reported reducing their soda consumption during the summer campaign, with half of those giving it up altogether.

Impressed with the results, health officials from Contra Costa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, San Francisco and Marin counties organized to launch a regionwide initiative this year.

"There was great enthusiasm from everyone for taking it Bay Area-wide," said Dr. Armor Santiago, chairman of the Bay Area Nutrition and Physical Activity Collaborative, a coalition of more than 80 public and private organizations that promotes sound nutrition and physical activity, particularly in low-income communities.

The regionwide collaborative, which is based in Santa Clara County, is leading the Soda Free Summer campaign.

The sugary drink, along with its counterparts - sweetened ice teas and sports drinks - is increasingly in the cross-hairs of nutritionists, who blame sugar-saturated beverages as a key cause of the nation's growing girth, in particular among youth.

The Center for Weight and Health at UC Berkeley, states that sugared beverage consumption has increased 500 percent over the past five decades - at a rate that roughly corresponds with the increase in overweight children.

While nutritionists in the campaign have stressed that it is a spirited education campaign, not warfare against a product, battle metaphors still abounded at the Wednesday gathering launching the campaign.

"Kaiser sponsored this campaign because we believe it can be an effective strategy for combating overweight in children and adults," said Dr. Scott Gee, a Kaiser Permanente pediatrician. Kaiser sponsored last year's Alameda County campaign and is continuing its support for the initiative this year.

Gee told the crowd of about 100 gathered for the campaign launch that he's seen rates of Type 2 diabetes in children multiply during the 20 years he's been in practice. And he described a recent study concluding that it took the consumption of just 150 excess calories a day to separate the children who became overweight from those who maintained normal weights.

"And what is 150 calories a day? It's a can of soda," Gee said.

Robert Corpus, a 21-year-old recovering "sodaholic" from San Jose who's now counseling youth to cut their soda consumption, was more blunt with his words at the event.

"We're in our own little war here," he said. "The war on obesity."

Last January, he cut back his soda drinking habit from two or three cans a day to about the same amount per week after he learned about the high sugar content of soda through a program at Healthy Silicon Valley.

"They're all about education and outreach, and they got me," Corpus said.

His younger brother's weight gain also motivated him, along with his father's diagnosis with Type 2 diabetes. Since Corpus cut his soda consumption and also started exercising regularly, he said he has lost more than 5 pounds.

The campaign is based on "pledge cards" that residents sign and mail in, committing to monitor their soda consumption with a simple 10-week log. They note days they're "soda free." Participants are also encouraged to instead drink water, unsweetened ice tea, nonfat milk and an occasional glass of juice, instead of drinks loaded with sugar.

The pledge brochure lists facts meant to astonish: Soda is the No. 1 source of sugar in the American diet; drinking one 20-ounce bottle of soda daily for a year can lead to a 25-pound weight gain; and the average teen drinks 750 cans of soda yearly.

At the end of the 10-week campaign, a raffle with various prizes will be held for those sending in pledge cards.

Some 400,000 pledge cards have been printed, Santiago said, and will be distributed to a wide range of organizations around the Bay Area, including parks and recreation departments, food banks, summer camps, Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCAs and churches.

Coupled with the pledge cards is a "Be Sugar Savvy" education campaign, often delivered in short talks to groups to enlist participation in the campaign.

In San Mateo County, for example, training sessions are already under way, teaching camp counselors, personnel at recreation departments, youth counselors and others about the levels of sugar in drinks and foods, said Eliana Schultz, director of public health nutrition services for the San Mateo County Health Department. These trainees in turn will pass on their knowledge to those under their charge, while encouraging them to sign up for the campaign.

"The main gist of the training is to be aware of the amount of sugar in beverages, and in food in general," Schultz said. "Read labels," she added, noting that the sugar base of drinks and foods often comes under a variety of names, such as corn syrup, fructose and dextrose.

With the training and outreach, Schultz said organizers hope to sign on 15,000 San Mateo County residents for the Soda Free Summer campaign.

In Contra Costa County, Contra Costa Health Services mailed the pledge cards to 10,000 households. It's not been a hard sell, said Donna Coit, a nutritionist with the Community Wellness and Prevention Project.

"People are very receptive to the idea of healthier drinks like water, skim milk and unsweetened ice tea," Coit said.

Consuming a variety of drinks is also the message the California/Nevada Soft Drink Association wants to send. The Sacramento-based organization, which opposes the idea of bans on any type of drink, emphasized that there are many choices beyond a 240-calorie soda.

"Beverages come in all shapes and sizes," said Robert Achermann, spokesman for the association. "The beverage industry now has a variety of products to meet consumers' needs."

And a focus on soda is unfair, Achermann said.

"We don't think it's appropriate to single out one product," Achermann said. "There are a variety of factors at work" behind the alarming rise in overweight children, he said.

Santiago, with the Soda Free Summer campaign, knows that sedentary lifestyles are also a culprit behind excess weight. But he's adamant that a lack of awareness about the levels of sugar in bottled beverages does affect people's girth and health, and he's got a personal story to back it up.

Santiago said that when his son was 12 years old, he weighed 200 pounds. Santiago and his wife, not wanting to give their child artificial sweeteners, had permitted the boy to freely drink soda, which Santiago links to his son's extra pounds. Since they've switched to different drinks, his son has lost weight, Santiago said.

"What did they teach me in medical school about nutrition? Obviously not very much," he commented. "I'm embarrassed, but it's a real story of how even a health professional like myself may not be aware of what we're doing to our own family - making wrong choices and being a victim of marketing."

For more information on the Soda Free Summer campaign, visit www.sodafreesummer.org.

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BEVERAGE FACTS

- Soda is the No. 1 source of sugar in the American diet.

- 30 percent of all calories consumed daily are from sweetened beverages.
- Americans spend \$56 billion annually on purchasing nondiet soft drinks.
- U.S. teens consume twice as much soda as milk.
- Drinking just one 20-ounce bottle of soda each day for a year can result in gaining 25 extra pounds. SOURCE: Bay Area Nutrition and Physical Activity Collaborative



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