Excessive Consumption of Sugary Drinks Linked to Increased Risk of Death

To improve overall health and longevity, replace sweetened beverages with water and other sugarless drinks.

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Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), such as soda and energy drinks, are the single largest source of added sugar in Americans' diet. Now, new findings published in the journal Circulation suggest that drinking too many of these sugary drinks increases a person's risk of death from cardiovascular disease and, to a lesser degree, cancer, reports Boston's Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

For the inquiry, scientists reviewed data on adults from two large-scale longitudinal studies: 37,716 men in the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (1986 to 2014) and 80,647 women in the Nurses' Health Study (1980 to 2014). (Participants of these studies were required to answer surveys about their lifestyle factors and health status every two years.)

Findings showed that, once several major diet and lifestyle factors were accounted for, the greater number of SSBs a person drank the higher his or her risk of early death from any cause.

Consumption of one to four sugary drinks per month was associated with a 1 percent increased risk; two to six per week prompted a 6 percent increase; one to two per day resulted in a 14 percent uptick; and two or more per day precipitated a 21 percent surge. In addition, a rise in the risk of early death associated with drinking SSBs was more apparent among women than men.

More specifically, researchers found that those who drank two or more servings per day of SSBs had a 31 percent higher risk of experiencing an untimely death from heart disease compared with those who infrequently consumed such liquid refreshments. Furthermore, each additional serving per day was associated with a 10 percent increased risk of death related to cardiovascular disease.

Scientists also reported a more modest link between consumption of SSBs and the risk of early death from cancer. (Research has shown that excessive sugar can lead to being overweight or obese, thus putting individuals at higher risk for cancer and other diseases.)

Replacing SSBs with artificially sweetened drinks was associated with a lower risk of death. But gulping down at least four servings per day of these beverages also boosted the risk of both overall and cardiovascular-disease-related mortality among women in particular.

“Our results provide further support to limit intake of SSBs and to replace them with other beverages, preferably water, to improve overall health and longevity,” said Vasanti Malik, ScD, a researcher in the department of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the lead study author.

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