

Weigh-In

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Sugar-sweetened beverages are a major contributor to the obesity epidemic, a crisis that affects 31% of adults and 17% of children in Delaware. These include regular soda, sweet tea, lemonade, fruit punch, Kool-Aid, some flavored/vitamin waters, energy drinks and sports drinks.

A 12-ounce can of cola contains the equivalent of 10 teaspoons/packets of sugar. The 20-ounce bottle provides a whopping 16-18 teaspoons of sugar. A large 44-oz. cup with your favorite fountain drink provides close to 40 teaspoons/packs of sugar.

Not only are these beverages full of sugar, most are void of nutritional value. Sugary beverages promote tooth decay and the excess calories contribute to obesity. In turn, obesity increases the risk of a host of illnesses such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Once in a while, a serving of soda can fit into a healthy diet. However, if someone is using a can of soda to quench their thirst 1-2 times daily, that additional 150-300 empty calories daily is enough to promote a weight gain of 15 to 30 pounds in a year.

In her award-winning book, Soda Politics,¹ Marion Nestle, a professor at New York University, does an excellent job of outlining Big Soda's 'playbook', which reads also verbatim to the tactics used by the tobacco industry.

The American Beverage Association (aka 'Big Soda') refutes research as "junk science", emphasizes personal freedom, and tries to convince consumers that all you have to do is balance your calories with physical activity. (A 20-ounce bottle of regular soda contains 250 calories, which would require a teen to run for 50 minutes or walk 5 miles to burn those calories.)

They are spending millions to promote a product with zero nutritional value which has been directly linked to obesity. For each additional sugary beverage children consume the risk of obesity jumps by 60%.²

Targeted marketing to young, male, poorly educated, Hispanic or African-American overweight individuals is counteracting all efforts to improve the health of these at-risk populations. And while overall consumption patterns have leveled off, sugary beverages are still a mainstay in many groups.

In January 2015, the Delaware Center for Health Promotion, located at Delaware State University, joined forces with Kent Kids, a coalition of agencies concerned about the health and wellbeing of children and their families. A campaign called "Rethink Your Drink" was developed, which educates residents about the sugar content of these beverages. Funding for this grassroots initiative was provided by Nemours Health and Prevention Services.

A toolkit was developed for worksites/organizations that outlines the issue, as well as provides information about policy changes and healthy vending. Displays were created that illustrate the equivalent amount of sugar contained in beverages.

Residents in Delaware's unhealthiest county are being encouraged to take a pledge to reduce or eliminate their sugary beverage intake over a period of 30 days. In the past year, over 7,000 residents have had a face-to-face viewing of the sugary beverage display and have heard key messages, including the advice to replace sugary beverages with water. The displays have been

at libraries, schools, worksites, churches, grocery stores and large-scale community events. What is striking is the shock of both adults and children when they view the display.

It's relatively easy to purchase a sugary beverage, calculate its sugar content in teaspoons (divide the grams of sugar by 4) and place a cup with the equivalent teaspoons of sugar next to the bottle. A picture says a thousand words. This single visual placed in physician offices, clinics, hospital reception desks, fitness centers, etc. would go a long way in educating Delawareans about the importance of limiting their intake of sugary beverages.

It's a simple ask of Delawareans and it will improve the health status of our residents. For more information, contact me at mcarter@desu.edu or 302-857-7309.

References

1. Nestle, M. (2015). *Soda politics: Taking on big soda (and winning)*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Ludwig, D. S., Peterson, K. E., & Gortmaker, S. L. (2001, February 17). Relation between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: A prospective, observational analysis. *Lancet*, 357(9255), 505–508. [PubMed https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(00\)04041-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(00)04041-1)

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