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The Low-Down on Sweet Drinks

The juicy facts on your child's favourite thirst quenchers

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My daughter Maia called from the kitchen to say she was getting herself some juice. I did a quick tally—one glass at breakfast, one container in her school lunch—and realized my seven-year-old was pouring her third glass that day. After telling her to switch to water I started to wonder, how much is too much?

Like many parents, I limit sports drinks and pop, but fruit juice seems a bit more benign. When Maia was younger I simply watered her juice down. But somewhere around the time she learned to say “no” she caught on. My solution was to switch to organic juice or one that blended in veggies, but I was left with the nagging feeling I was feeding her empty calories.

too much of a good thing?

It turns out I was on the right track. The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) suggests parents set a limit on juice and soft drinks—aiming for no more than four to eight ounces (125 to 250 mL) a day, depending on your child’s size and weight. When you consider that a 250-mL glass of 100 percent juice comes loaded with up to 180 calories and 40 grams of sugar, and contains only a fraction of the nutrition found in fresh fruit, it’s easy to understand why too much juice isn’t good for our kids.

Winnipeg-based registered dietitian Gina Sunderland says parents don’t need to skip the juice aisle entirely. “Kids want their juice and parents want to provide nutrition.” She suggests selecting juice with additional health benefits (first make sure it’s 100 percent juice). “Juice has become more functional,” she says. “Some contain omega-3s; others have added calcium or vitamins.”

sweet treats

Sports drinks are in a whole different league from juice, though. Sunderland explains that not only are they expensive, but these sugary concoctions can encourage unhealthy dietary habits. “Kids don’t need one every time they go for a bike ride,” she says. “They only need them to replace electrolytes after sustained exercise.” She suggests a good guideline is to provide sports drinks when a child is engaged in an hour or more of vigorous activity, and rather than serving store-bought, make your own. (See recipe on second page.)

If sports drinks should be served infrequently, pop should appear in your child’s diet even less often than that. Soda pop has no nutritional value and should be considered a treat, no different from candy. Sunderland says parents can help their children develop healthy dietary habits by discussing the subject. “Explain why you are limiting these drinks, and offer options—either dessert or pop, but not both.” She explains parents can take the lead by reducing their own intake of sugary drinks. “We all need hydration—but water is the best choice.”

when juice is a problem

For most kids, the occasional extra glass of juice isn’t going to lead to health problems. But if you have a child who is overweight, or who is replacing healthy food with sweet drinks, it might be time to rethink juice, suggests Dr. Lili Nasseri, a family physician in Port Moody, B.C. Here are some of her suggestions to help cut back on juice consumption:

- Gradually add more and more water to each serving of juice.
- Decide with your child when he will have his juice (school lunch is a popular time), and serve water the rest of the time.
- Provide your child with a water bottle each morning and remind her to refill it regularly.
- Offer fruit instead of juice. “Two oranges will fill a child up and provide lots of fibre, while a glass of orange juice contains more calories than two oranges and can still leave a child unsatisfied.”

Writer Diane Selkirk says her daughter Maia hasn’t minded the decrease in juice—but did complain when her fresh-squeezed orange juice was watered down.

rethinking drinks

Here are a couple healthier drink recipes your kids can make, as suggested by Gina Sunderland:

Pop: Mix one part of your favourite 100 percent fruit juice with three parts sparkling water for a refreshing option. Add ice and a slice of fresh fruit for a special drink.

Sports drink: Mix one part 100 percent fruit juice with one part water and add a pinch of salt.