

Why no sweet drinks for children

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Often babies and children prefer sweet tasting fluids; however sugary drinks such as fruit juice, soft drink or cordial are not necessary and may cause health problems if drunk in large amounts.

What are sweet drinks?

Sweet drinks include all fruit juices, soft drinks, energy drinks, cordials, flavoured mineral waters and sports drinks either bought or home-made. Fruit juices contain sugars that are found naturally in fresh fruits, but become very concentrated when made into juice.

While breast milk, formula and unflavoured cows milk contain a sugar called lactose, these are not considered to be sweet drinks. Milk is important for children as it contains calcium needed for healthy bones and other key nutrients for growth and development.

How much is too much?

Children do not require any fruit juices or other sweet drinks to have a well-balanced and healthy diet. If you do include sweet drinks in your child's diet, limit this to one small glass per day. Intake of sweet drinks reduces overall nutritional quality of your child's diet and also teaches children the 'habit' of drinking sweet drinks.

Why limit juice?

As juice comes from fresh fruit and vegetables, it is easy to believe it is a natural, healthy food, full of vitamins. For example, children only need half an orange to get their daily requirement of vitamin C – but it takes three or four oranges to make one glass of juice.

Encourage your children to eat fresh fruit and vegetables instead of juice. This will:

- supply fibre to the diet and help prevent constipation
- satisfy their appetite for longer, helping to prevent over-eating
- help with skills such as peeling and chewing
- teach about different textures, colour and tastes
- Provide a convenient, healthy and nourishing option for snacks.

What should I give my child to drink?

Breast milk is the perfect feed for infants; ideally infants should be exclusively breast fed for the first six months. For children younger than 12 months old, breast milk or infant formula should be the main drink. After 12 months of age, when your child has reduced breastfeeding or formula, full fat cow's milk can be offered as a drink.

While milk is important for calcium, too much can lead to poor appetite. Three glasses per day is suggested.

For toddlers and older children, water is the preferred drink, so encourage this regularly throughout the day.

Artificially sweetened cordial and soft drinks are not recommended as they teach your child the habit of sweet drinks.

Which milk should I give my child?

For children under two years, only full fat dairy products are recommended.

From two to five years, reduced fat milk and dairy products can be offered; however skim milk and dairy products are not appropriate.

When children are over five years, either skim or reduced fat milk and dairy products can be used.

Flavoured milks are not recommended as they are higher in sugar than plain milks.

What happens when children drink too many sweet drinks?

Excess weight gain

Sweet drinks are high in energy and contain very little nutritional value towards your child's diet. Regular intake of sweet drinks may lead towards energy imbalance and excess weight gain.



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Tooth decay

Children who have sweet drinks such as cordial, soft drink and juice regularly, are at a higher risk of tooth decay.

For babies and toddlers, problems start when a bottle is used for comfort when going to sleep, to suck during the night or to snack on during the day. If the bottle contains any drink other than water, even milk, the sugar in the fluid sits on the teeth and gums for some time and this is when decay can start, even before the teeth have broken through.

Avoid using a baby's bottle for comfort and encourage your child to drink from a cup from around six months of age.

It is also important to develop a regular tooth cleaning routine as soon as your child's first tooth appears.

Small appetite and picky eating

Sweet drinks are full of energy and can fill children up making them less hungry for other foods.

Most sweet drinks are poor sources of other valuable nutrients and, for picky eaters, stopping or limiting sweet drinks is a helpful way to encourage appetite for other foods. Problems such as iron deficiency anaemia, and failure to thrive may occur in infants and toddlers who replace foods such as breast milk, formula or solids with sweet drinks.

Change in bowel habits

Young children may have problems digesting some of the sugars in sweet drinks, and the results can be loose bowel actions and even diarrhoea. This may affect growth if energy and nutrients are lost from the body. When sweet drinks are removed from a child's diet, loose bowel actions may improve.

How do I reduce sweet drinks?

Changing your child's diet can be a challenge, but remember young children can only eat or drink what is given to them. Avoid keeping sweet drinks in the house and try not to drink them yourself. If your child already has sweet drinks regularly, or if you have older children who are used to having sweet drinks available, start to reduce the number of drinks per day and limit the amounts you buy. Offer the remaining drinks watered down, until you can stop them. Children may be upset at first but will get used to it if you continue.

- Be patient. This may take time, particularly if your child is in the habit of wanting juice or cordial whenever they are thirsty or hungry.

Important tips about sweet drinks

- Children do not need sweet drinks for good health.
- Fruit and vegetable juice, soft drinks, energy drinks, flavoured milk, mineral water, cordials and sport drinks are all considered sweet drink choices.
- Encourage children to drink and enjoy water.
- Encourage children to eat fresh fruit and vegetables instead of drinking juice.
- Drinking large amounts of sweet drinks may result in:
 - excess weight gain
 - tooth decay
 - picky eating
 - growth problems
 - loose bowel actions.
- Avoid using a baby's bottle to settle your child to sleep.
- Encourage your child to drink from a cup from around six months.
- Start a tooth brushing routine as soon as your child's first tooth appears.
- Visit your local doctor or health centre if you have concerns about your child's health and growth.

Photograph by Fiona Basile.

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