

Script – Print – Is diet soda bad for you?

Few beverages spark as much debate as diet soda. One week it's linked to a new health concern, the next it's defended as a helpful substitute for sugary drinks. So, what's the truth?

Despite many studies and plenty of opinions, the answer isn't as simple as yes or no. Health experts say for most people, an occasional diet soda isn't going to hurt you – but it also shouldn't be a substitute for healthier beverages like water.

One thing is certain: more research is needed, especially on diet soda's impact on dementia risk. A recent study published by the Journals of Alzheimer's Disease, shows an association. The results question a potential increased dementia risk associated with frequent consumption of diet soda.

Another recent unpublished study suggested a possible link between daily diet soda consumption and nonalcoholic fatty liver disease. However, experts warn that unpublished research isn't conclusive and doesn't prove that diet soda causes liver disease.

"I thought it was rather interesting, because when I did research on it, and looking into more medical articles and reliable sources, it actually found that it was inconclusive whether or not diet soda increased the risk," says Erin Wojewodzki, APRN, a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare.

While research continues, most experts agree that moderate diet soda consumption is generally fine for healthy adults. The bigger issue is what else is happening in a person's diet and lifestyle.

People may choose diet soda over regular soda to help manage blood sugar levels, lower the risk of tooth decay or manage weight. But diet soda typically lacks ingredients that your body needs. That's when it's time to turn to other options such as water, sparkling water, seltzer, skim milk, and unsweetened tea or coffee.

Wojewodzki says it's important to meet her patients where they are when it comes to trying to reduce diet soda consumption. "We have to look at the patient as a whole," she says. "If you're essentially healthy but you like to drink 10 diet cokes a day, let's work together."

Wojewodzki adds recommendations can change depending on a person's overall health. Someone dealing with obesity or Type 2 diabetes, for example, may require a different plan than someone who is not.

Nicole O'Neill is a dietitian with OSF HealthCare. Like Wojewodzki, she agrees with the adage 'everything in moderation.'

"I personally like the idea of a diet soda for a good majority of my patient population," she says. "So, if you can take a high-calorie regular soda and replace it with a non-calorie diet soda, it gives you a calorie deficit that leads to weight loss. One or two, I'm OK with that."

There are other factors to think about, according to Wojewodzki. "Diet does play a big role," she says. "Are we eating healthy? Are we eating out a lot? Are we eating fast food? Are we eating a lot of sugar, a lot of unhealthy food? We need to be taking care of our body and eating healthy and exercising as well."

Unhealthy cravings

O'Neill concurs – people who drink diet sodas tend to crave other unhealthy treats at the same time.

"Most people want a diet soda with something like peanut M&Ms, pizza, a cheeseburger," says O'Neill. "If you're drinking a diet soda and it's just a drink, it's not a big deal. But if every time you have a diet soda, you want a bag of chips, I would say we need to talk about alternatives."

For people who are trying to cut back on their diet soda, O'Neill offers a few tips. Try substituting diet soda with sparkling water, flavored seltzer or unsweetened tea. Gradually reduce caffeine instead of going cold turkey. And determine what your triggers are – like certain times of the day that make you reach for a can of diet soda.

"We have to find alternatives, though, and it really is person specific," says O'Neill. "If you hate water, we were going to try some water flavoring. If you hate water flavorings, because it's also got some artificial sweetener in it, maybe we talk about fruit infusions or herbs or something, just to give your water flavor."

Zero sugar soda also contains no sugar or calories but is often formulated to taste more like the original sugary version. It may use a blend of sweeteners, such as aspartame, acesulfame potassium or sucralose, depending on the brand. Health experts don't consider one category healthier than the other. The same advice applies to both.

Wojewodzki says there's no magic drink for better health. Whether you drink diet soda occasionally or every day, the bigger picture is what's important. Eat a balanced diet, stay active and make water your primary drink of choice.