



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

About Healthy Beverage Initiatives



Being prepared for questions from employees, visitors and the media is an important part of getting buy-in and creating sustainability for a healthy beverage policy or initiative.

Below are some frequently asked questions and common concerns that your organization may encounter as you promote your new policy or initiative.

Why focus on sugary drinks? What about French fries, ice cream, and candy – aren't they all unhealthy?

Unlike food, sugary drinks are liquid calories with little or no nutritional value. Liquid calories are not as filling as food calories, and drinking sugary beverages can increase the chances that a person will take in too



The Public Health Law Center and the American Cancer Society have partnered to develop resources to help organizations create healthier food environments, with a special focus on hospital and healthcare settings. This publication, which is part of a larger toolkit, provides responses for questions and concerns that can come up when healthcare organizations implement healthy beverage initiatives.

many calories.¹ Although there are a variety of unhealthy foods, sugary drinks are the single largest source of added sugar for all age groups in the U.S.,² and most adults, adolescents, and children consume quantities of added sugar in excess of current dietary guidelines.³

Additionally, studies have consistently linked sugary drink consumption with detrimental health effects. Specifically, consumption has been linked with an increased risk of type 2 diabetes,⁴ weight gain and obesity,⁵ tooth decay,⁶ coronary heart disease,⁷ hypertension,⁸ stroke,⁹ metabolic syndrome,¹⁰ cancer,¹¹ fatty liver disease,¹² and mortality.¹³ Merely consuming one additional serving of a sugary drink per day increases a person's risk for type 2 diabetes by 13%, for stroke by 13%, and for heart attack by 22%,¹⁴ and nearly one in ten cases of type 2 diabetes in the U.S. can be attributed to sugary drink consumption.¹⁵ For more information about sugary drink consumption and its health effects, see [*Sickly Sweet: Why Focus on Sugary Drinks?*](#)

Being healthy is all about balancing calories in and calories out. Aren't sugary drinks fine if their intake is paired with eating fewer calories and increased physical activity?

Managing energy balance (i.e. energy intake through food and beverages with those expended through activity) is key to maintaining a healthy weight. However, people who drink a lot of soda or other sugary drinks tend to have a hard time maintaining this balance. Sugary drinks typically contain a lot of calories (without much, if any nutrients), and practically speaking, to burn off the calories in one 12-ounce regular soda, an adult would have to walk for 30 minutes at a brisk pace.

Beyond the number of calories in sugary drinks, the type of calories also plays a role in why regulating energy intake is harder for people when consuming sugary drinks. Sugary drinks are liquid calories, and studies indicate that people who add calories to their diet through sugary drinks do not tend to reduce the calories they consume from other sources.¹⁶

Shouldn't we educate people about healthy eating, not force them to behave in a certain way?

Education is an important part of any effort to get people to change their behaviors; however, it can only go so far. For example, an evaluation of a menu labeling intervention at a children's hospital that used red, yellow, and green colors to indicate unhealthy items, less unhealthy, and healthy items, respectively, observed short-term improvements in healthier food intake, but the effect waned over time and had minimal effect on sugary beverage consumption.¹⁷ In contrast, changing people's environments to make healthy choices the easy, default choices

often leads to more sustainable health behavior changes.¹⁸ For example, a study conducted in two Boston teaching hospitals indicated that an educational campaign decreased purchases of sugary drinks in hospital cafeterias only when sugary drink availability was also addressed through increased prices.¹⁹

To achieve real change, education must be accompanied by environmental changes to make healthy choices the easy, default choices, such as by providing access to free, safe drinking water; limiting access to sugary drinks; promoting access to healthy beverages; and using pricing strategies to make healthy drink choices more affordable than unhealthy ones. For this reason, public health experts from the CDC, National Academies of Sciences, American Heart Association, American Academy of Pediatrics and elsewhere recommend these approaches for reducing sugary drink consumption.

Isn't it wrong for hospitals and other healthcare institutions to deny patients and visitors foods that may provide them comfort in a time of stress?

Hospitals and healthcare providers are on the front lines of addressing diet-related chronic diseases. Unhealthy weights and poor diet contribute to the leading causes of death in the U.S., and research has shown that diet quality is linked to better treatment outcomes for many chronic diseases.²⁰

Creating a treatment environment that is free of unhealthy food and beverage exposure should be a priority. This is why national health experts such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Heart Association and American Medical Association have called on healthcare organizations to model healthy beverage environments.²¹ Patients can still be given sugary drinks in clinical situations of need.

What about clinical indications for sugary beverages, such as hypoglycemia or ginger ale for nausea? What are dietary alternatives?

One hundred percent fruit juice contains similar, fast-acting sugars as soda, and in comparable amounts.

Ginger is a widely used remedy for nausea. Any product containing real ginger can help to settle an upset stomach, such as ginger tea, ginger snaps, or crystallized ginger. Most ginger

ale products on the market do not have much, if any, real ginger in them. Other dietary tips for nausea management include:

- Snacking on crackers, toast, dry cereal;
- Eating more frequent small meals and snacks;
- Eating bland goods that don't have a strong odor and avoiding fatty, spicy foods; or
- Smelling fresh lemon.

Don't sports drinks provide sugars and electrolytes that are important for staying hydrated?

Intense marketing has led many to believe that sports drinks are necessary to remain healthy and safe during exercise. The truth is that for the general population, water is just as effective as sports drinks at hydrating the body,²² and consuming a nutritious meal can replenish the electrolytes lost during exercise.²³ Water, which is needed by every system in your body to function properly, should be the preferred, healthy beverage option.

What about the fact that many healthcare providers rely on the caffeine in soda to stay alert during long shifts?

Individuals may still bring soda, energy drinks, or other sugary drinks onto hospital property. Other beverages, such as coffee and tea, are also caffeine sources, if those are preferred. There are also many ways to increase alertness that do not depend on caffeine (and that offer additional health benefits), such as exercising and being active, and eating regular, nutritious meals and snacks.

What about diet drinks? Aren't artificial sweeteners helpful for weight control?

Artificially sweetened beverages may be a better choice compared to sugary drinks; however, research is mixed as to whether they are an effective weight loss aid. Diet beverages can have a sweeter taste than sugary drinks and may actually *increase* cravings for intensely sweet food or beverages, which could lead to eating more calories through other foods and beverages. Public health experts agree that reducing sugary drink intake does not require substituting sugary drinks with artificially sweetened beverages.

As availability of artificial sweeteners has increased, so has speculation about potential health risks. However, here again, current research has shown mixed results.²⁴ High-quality evidence on the health effects of prolonged consumption of artificially sweetened beverages is currently lacking. One clear area of consensus is that children should be discouraged from consuming artificial sweeteners.

Hospitals have taken varied approaches to artificially sweetened drinks as part of their healthy beverage initiatives, with some promoting them as alternatives, and others limiting or discontinuing their supply. For more information about artificially sweetened beverages, see [*Beverage Policies & Drinks with Artificial Sweeteners*](#).

How should organizations respond to concerns that limiting sales of sugary beverages will hurt an important source of revenue?

When organizations choose to provide healthy foods and beverage environments for their clients, staff, and visitors, they affirm their commitment to the health of their communities. Increasing their revenue streams should not require sacrificing the health of their constituents. This is a message that staff and community members will be able to appreciate and embrace. For more information about navigating financial concerns related to healthy beverage policies and initiatives, see [*Healthy Beverage Policies, Healthy Bottom Lines*](#).

Additional Resources

The other resources in this series can be found on the Public Health Law Center's website at publichealthlawcenter.org. The [*Healthy Healthcare Toolkit*](#) includes:

- [*Beverage Policies & Drinks with Artificial Sweeteners*](#)
- [*Building Blocks for Success: Developing Healthy Beverage Policies & Initiatives*](#)
- [*Food & Beverage Pledges & Policies for Hospitals & Healthcare Systems*](#)
- [*Frequently Asked Questions about Healthy Beverage Initiatives*](#)
- [*Healthcare Can Lead the Way: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice*](#)
- [*Healthy Beverage Hot Spots: Identifying & Utilizing the Institutional Access Points*](#)
- [*Healthy Beverage Policies, Healthy Bottom Lines*](#)
- [*Healthy Beverage Policies: Key Definitions & Sample Standards*](#)
- [*Sickly Sweet: Why Focus on Sugary Drinks?*](#)
- [*Thirsty for Health — Tap Water & Healthcare*](#)

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The Public Health Law Center provides information and legal technical assistance on issues related to public health. The Center does not provide legal representation or advice. This document should not be considered legal advice.

Endnotes

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