When Does Sweet Become Too Sweet?

May 1, 2013

While New Yorkers prepare to see a change in restaurant and café menus as Mayor Bloomberg’s ban on sugary drinks is set to take effect, residents and health professionals from other states are stepping back to reconsider their own habits. The New York ban would limit the sale of 16-ounce or larger sweetened drinks to supermarkets and convenience stores. Fast food chains, restaurants, and even sporting arenas would see the sweet drinks disappear. In addition to sodas and energy drinks, coffee based drinks that are less than 50% milk are also subject to the ban.

Despite urgings from health advocates, the FDA is unlikely to approve measures of the ban nationwide. So Bostonians do not yet have to worry about their favorite drink disappearing. However, the talk from New York should serve as a wake-up call to those of us who happily guzzle down sugary drinks with no idea what’s inside. After all, it is common knowledge that sugar leads to obesity and other complications like diabetes. As Dr. Walter Willett, the chairman of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health noted, “Each 12-ounce serving of soda a person consumes each day raises type 2 diabetes risk by 10 to 15 percent, and many Americans are consuming five or six servings.”

So the question is: exactly how bad are sweetened drinks for our health? There are a number of answers.

The Nutrition Source, a website maintained by the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, has created a guide to the amount of sugar in popular drinks, represented by teaspoons. Drinks represented by red teaspoons are those that should rarely be drunk. Yellow teaspoons represent drinks that can be enjoyed sporadically. Green teaspoons are those drinks that the Nutrition Source recommends because of their little or no added sugar.
In a recent study, the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity found that soda, fruit drinks, and energy drinks contained between 27 and 30 grams of sugar, and that even diet or low calorie drink options contained artificial sweeteners. Additionally, drinking just one 8-ounce sugary drink every day increases a child’s chance of becoming obese by 60%.

Lastly, to put the amount of sugar in sweetened drinks into context, Men’s Health magazine compiled a list of the “20 Worst Drinks in America” and compared the content of the drink to other foods. For example, they found that a venti Starbucks Peppermint White Chocolate Mocha with Whipped Cream was comparable to a staggering 8 ½ scoops of Edy’s Slow churched Rich and Creamy Coffee Ice Cream. With 660 calories, 22g of fat and 95g of sugar, this drink is dinner and dessert all in one.

The winner for their worst drink in America? Cold Stone Creamery’s “Gotta Have It” size PB&C shake that tops out at 2,010 calories, 131g of fat and 153g of sugar. As they put it, that’s “like slurping up 68 strips of bacon.” And it’s three times the recommended daily maximum value of saturated fat.
It is unclear what will happen in New York City, as the ban has already been blocked by the State Supreme Court, a decision the Mayor intends to fight. But cutting out excess sugar and swapping sweet drinks for a low-calorie alternative is a wise move for people in all cities, of all ages.