

Why no sweet drinks for children



Nutrition

Often babies and children prefer sweet tasting drinks, but 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 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 cow's milk contain a sugar called lactose, these are not considered to be sweet drinks. Milk is important for children's healthy bones, and for growth and development.

How much is too much?

Children do not need any fruit juices or other sweet drinks to have a healthy diet. If chosen, limit to 1 small cup of fruit juice (no added sugar) one or two times a week. Intake of sweet drinks reduces the 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. Children only need half an orange to get their daily 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 appetite for longer, helping to prevent over eating

- help with skills such as 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 best drink for infants. For children less than 12 months old, breast milk or infant formula should be the main drink. After 12 months of age, when your toddler has reduced breastfeeding or formula, full fat cow's milk and water are recommended as the best drinks. While milk is important for calcium, drinking too much can lead to poor appetite. Three small serves each day is suggested. For healthy growth children need around 2 cups of dairy foods each day, including milk.

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

Fruit juice, cordial, soft drinks, and flavoured water are not needed. Unpasteurised milks, caffeinated drinks, tea, coffee and herbal drinks are all not recommended for children.

Artificially sweetened cordial and soft drinks are also not recommended as they still 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 years reduced fat milk and dairy products can be offered.

Encourage plain milk in preference to flavoured milks which are higher in sugar.

Calcium-enriched soy and other plant-based milks (e.g., rice, oat, almond) can be used after 12 months of age, as long as these are full-fat and there are other protein foods such as meat, lentils, and eggs in the diet.

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What happens when children drink too many sweet drinks?

Excess weight gain

Sweet drinks are high in energy and contain very little nutrition for your child's diet. Regular intake of sweet drinks may lead to excess weight gain.

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 on 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 start teaching your child to drink from a cup from around six months of age. Stop bottles from around one year 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 fussy eating

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

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 poor growth 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 or 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.

Bottles to cup

Many toddlers become attached to their bottles – they provide comfort and security as well as nutrition. From around six months of age, infants can learn to drink from a cup and by 12 months, most toddlers have good enough coordination to hold a cup and drink from it. Tips to reducing bottles include:

- gradually reduce the number of bottles offered, or the amount in each one
- stop some of the day-time bottles first and offer a small cup of milk instead
- if bottles are used to help your toddler sleep, introduce new bed-time routines such as a small cup of milk instead of the bottle, story time or a cuddly toy.

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 sweet drinks 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 water, mineral water, cordials and sport drinks are all considered sweet drinks
- after their first birthday children need around two cups of dairy foods each day, including milk, for healthy growth
- enjoy water as the main drink in your family
- avoid using a baby's bottle to settle your child to sleep
- encourage your child to drink from a cup from around six months
- stop bottles from around one year of age
- 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

Nutrition

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