



Center for Weight & Health

Center Information Sheet

Sports Drinks



Frequently Asked Questions about Sports Drinks

With answers from researchers at the
Center for Weight & Health, U.C. Berkeley

Parents, coaches, and physical education instructors often ask about the value of sports drinks. Research shows that water is the best drink for children during the school day and at most sports practices. Water doesn't contain unnecessary calories or artificial sweeteners and children don't need the extra electrolytes and minerals that sports drinks may provide.

I coach a soccer team for children under 10 years old, and they sweat a lot. Isn't Gatorade or Powerade the best drink for after practice?

For most young children in sports, water is the best way to rehydrate (restore water). Research shows that even when children exercise vigorously -- running nonstop for an entire hour -- water is just as good at adding back the fluids they need while keeping their electrolytes (for example, salt) in balance.¹⁻⁵ And water doesn't increase levels of sugar in the blood the way that sports drinks can.^{2,6} Children get plenty of electrolytes from the food they eat, so during the school day and at most practices, sports drinks don't provide any extra benefit over water.

For more information on the
Dr. Robert C. and Veronica
Atkins Center for Weight &
Health, UC Berkeley
www.cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh
510-642-2915

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Aren't sports drinks and juice a lot healthier than soda? And what about Vitamin Water and new sports drinks like Propel, with lower sugar?

Water is the best drink for children. Soda, sports drinks, and nearly all fruit juices provide a lot of extra sugar that children don't need. Many fruit juices have added sweeteners and are processed so that little to no nutritional value remains. While some juices provide vitamins, even 100% juice has the same number of calories as soda so it's better to get the vitamins from fresh fruit. Sports drinks also contain sweeteners and a lot of calories. Those calories add up: a student who drinks one 20-oz sports drink every day for a year could gain about 13 extra pounds! Also, many sports drinks contain high fructose corn syrup (also the main sweetener in soda), which may be linked to increased rates of obesity.⁷ While manufacturers are developing products with lower sugar content, they are replacing the sugar with artificial sweeteners such as Sucralose that have no nutritional value. Studies suggest that artificial sweeteners may increase people's taste for sweets⁸ and even lead people to eat more after exercising.⁹

My kids love sports drinks and other sugary drinks. How do I get them to stop nagging me for them?

It can be difficult to resist the pressure of advertising. Soft drink companies spend over 2 billion dollars each year advertising their products, with **over 200 million dollars** dedicated to selling sports drinks.¹⁰ You can explain to your child that sports drinks are similar to soda. **Even if your child is thin, the empty calories and refined sugar in sports drinks aren't healthy.** Talk to other parents about your concerns and work with schools and sports teams to promote healthy drinks and snacks such as water, nonfat or lowfat milk, fresh fruit, cut up vegetables, unbuttered popcorn, or nuts.

If professional athletes are promoting and drinking sports drinks, shouldn't my kids? I want them to be able to do their best. So why not drink what the pros drink?

In 5¹⁻⁵ out of 6⁶ studies, trained athletes performed just as well with water as with sports drinks during intense exercise of less than one hour. With exercise beyond an hour, athletes may improve certain types of extreme activities—like their sprint times – with sports drinks rather than water.² Sports drinks may be appropriate for children in competitive sports when exercising intensely for more than one hour. But **during the school day and at most sports practices, water is the best drink for children.**

Is it OK to have sports drinks and other sugared drinks once in awhile? How often is OK?

The drinking of sugared beverages has increased 500% over the last 50 years. Today the average American drinks **50 gallons** of soda each year,¹¹ which is equal to about 75,000 calories per year! Soda and sports drinks provide no nutritional benefits to children and may contribute to obesity.⁷ Sports drinks are not okay even once or twice a week at practice or games -- it's recommended that children do not drink any sports drinks or other sweetened beverages on a regular basis. There will undoubtedly be events or parties where these will be the only drink options, but it would be better not to make these drinks part of the normal routine.

My kids don't like water and hate drinking out of the water fountains at school. They'll hardly even drink bottled water. How do I get them to drink the water they need?

Studies have shown that when kids are playing actively they will drink enough water if it's made available instead of sweetened sports drinks.¹ There are special organs in the body that sense when fluid is low and stimulate thirst centers in the brain to make us drink. During almost all activities, children will drink enough water to meet the body's needs.



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Prepared by: Kristine Madsen, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.A.P.
Dr. Robert C. and Veronica Atkins
Center for Weight and Health, UC Berkeley

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