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Academic Position Paper Concludes: Some Calories More Harmful than Others

“Beyond Calories” analysis finds unanimity among researchers on unique role sugar-sweetened beverages play in chronic health problems, despite challenges in current landscape of nutrition research

A position paper written by a group of twenty-two researchers and published in a leading scientific journal provides a comprehensive review of the current challenging landscape of nutrition research, including a notable warning that consumption of soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages increases cardio-metabolic risk factors.

The findings, published in *Obesity Reviews* and available online today [[CLICK HERE FOR REPORT](#)], are the result of a July 2017 academic conference hosted by the CrossFit Foundation. The conference convened the group of international nutrition scientists and researchers to review the current scientific record and the specific dietary components that lead to cardio-metabolic factors associated with obesity, cardiovascular disease, and type-2 diabetes, independent of caloric intake.

While the paper reviews the significant challenges involved in conducting and interpreting nutrition research—detailing the historically conflicting expert opinions regarding the health effects of food components such as fat, sugar, and carbohydrate—the participants did arrive at one conclusion: the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages clearly increases risk factors for chronic diseases such cardiovascular disease, and type-2 diabetes, even compared with calorically-equal amounts of starch.

This finding and unanimity of scientific experts is notable because it undercuts the beverage industry’s focus on balancing calorie consumption with calorie expenditure. The industry’s “energy balance” argument falsely assures the consumer that sugar consumption is not uniquely harmful in its effect on obesity and cardiometabolic disease—claiming that, like any food, added sugar can fit into a healthy diet as long as the excess calories are burned through increased physical activity. However, the review of the evidence encapsulated within the “Beyond Calories” position paper confirms that some calories are more harmful than others in

terms of their cardiometabolic effect, and that a healthy diet is about more than “energy balance.” The review summarizes evidence that risk factors even increase when sugars are consumed within diets that do not result in weight gain.

The paper’s finding also undercuts the beverage industry’s resistance to the development of consumption-focused health policies—such as soda taxes, warning labels, and marketing restrictions—that could impact the dramatic global rise in cardio-metabolic disease. The paper’s sugar-sweetened beverage finding is also relevant to recent legislative and legal battles, such as a 2017 Ninth Circuit court decision that prevented the City of San Francisco from implementing a soda warning label, which hinged upon the court’s determination of whether soda and other sweetened beverages are uniquely harmful to human health or merely one source of calories among many.

As a [recent article](#) in the Journal of the American Medical Association explained, “The court noted that...a clearer emphasis in the law on the special harms of SSBs [sugar-sweetened beverages], rather than added sugars in general, would have strengthened the government’s case.”

First author Dr. Kimber Stanhope of University of California, Davis, noted that the paper’s delineation of the challenges associated with conducting and interpreting nutritional research may help the public better understand inconsistencies in nutrition advice, and suggested that “this thorough academic review of the current body of nutrition research is a valuable contribution that may both improve the design of future research and focus attention on research areas that may have the greatest impact in slowing the epidemics of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and type-2 diabetes.”

The factors that lead to obesity and chronic disease are as complex as the human body itself. But while the authors’ findings were inconclusive in regards to several other questions such as low-fat versus low-carbohydrate diets, the scientists’ conclusions regarding the impacts of sugar-sweetened beverages were clear.

“The food and beverage industry has influenced the field of nutrition for decades by highlighting the health impact of caloric intake at the expense of other factors that might call their products into question,” said Director Olivia Leonard of the CrossFit Foundation. “These tactics have exerted a devastating impact on human health. We’re proud to support efforts to correct and inform public perception of the consumption and lifestyle choices that impact individual health.”

About the CrossFit Foundation: The CrossFit Foundation’s mission is to improve health and fitness through education, research, philanthropy, and advocacy.

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