

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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## “Diet Drink Dilemma”

Diet beverages are marketed as healthier, less harmful alternatives to their sugary soda counterparts. People drink diet sodas to help cut calories and to avoid the well-known downsides of too much real sugar. Soda is one of the most demonized junk foods in the United States, topping just about every list of things to avoid for a healthier life. But are these “healthier” alternatives really all they’re advertised to be? Sugary sodas are among the most aggressively marketed beverage products on the planet. Coke and Pepsi, for example, together spent about half a billion dollars to advertise their namesake products to US consumers in 2019. In 2020, the average American will drink about 149 liters of carbonated soft drinks—that’s nearly 40 gallons. Such high levels of consumption earned soda companies \$133.7 billion, or an average of \$404 from every US consumer in 2019. However, an excess of sugar-sweetened beverages can wreak havoc on health, and lead to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, gout, decreased bone health, and cavities, among other ill effects. Six sugar substitutes are included on the FDA’s Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) list, and approved for use in food: aspartame, sucralose, saccharine, neotame, advantame, and acesulfame potassium-k. The plant-derived sweetener stevia gets mixed reviews from the FDA. But are the artificially sweetened drinks safe? In a recent study, published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, researchers found that compared with non-consumers, those who consumed higher amounts of sugary drinks were at 20% increased risk of cardiovascular disease, while higher consumers of artificially sweetened beverages (ASB) were at 32% increased risk. Also, a 2015 study found that artificially sweetened beverages had positive associations with type 2 diabetes incidence. And a 2017 review published in *Nutrition and Obesity* found that artificial sweeteners contributed to metabolic syndrome and the obesity epidemic. These authors concluded that, “Artificial sweeteners can help you lower your sugar intake, but it’s increasingly clear that the switch comes with a price—they “appear to change the host microbiome (our natural internal healthy microbes), lead to decreased satiety, and alter glucose homeostasis, and are associated with increased caloric consumption and weight gain.” The beverage industry is willing to spend billions to persuade you that diet drinks are a healthier alternative to sugar-sweetened beverages, but that doesn’t make it true. So, to play it safe, just follow the [2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) and reach for water, fat-free or low-fat milk, or 100% fruit juice to quench your thirst.

In the America that I love, many use artificial sweeteners as a sugar alternative but we must be aware that there are uncorroborated studies (mostly in animals) which raise questions regarding their safety.

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