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## Rethinking what you're drinking

By **CAROLE BRODSKY**  
Updated: 10/02/2009 08:01:03 AM PDT

Sodas prime culprit in childhood obesity  
for The Daily Journal

Terry Nieves, the program director for the Mendocino County Schools Network for a Healthy California, holds up an empty 20-ounce soda bottle. In it are 17 cubes of sugar.

This corroborates research by the UCLA Center of Health Policy Research and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, which states that there is a strong correlation between soda consumption and obesity.

"Based on this research, adults who drink one soda or more per day are 27 percent more likely to be overweight, regardless of income or ethnicity," explains Nieves.

To combat what some health officials see as an epidemic rivaling tobacco addiction, Nieves and her staff are offering a "Rethink Your Drink" campaign throughout the county.

"The average teenager drinks 750 cans of soda per year," says Nieves. Public Health Officer Dr. Marvin Trotter states that at the current levels, one in three children will become diabetic by the age of 40. Sweetened beverages, according to Nieves, are fueling the problem.

"Over the past 30 years, Americans are consuming 278 calories more per day. There are 240 calories in the average bottle of soda," says Nieves. She has been providing "Sugar Savvy" trainings for educators and health professionals, trying to spread the word about the long-term dangers of drinking sweetened beverages and eating foods high in sugar.

"In Mendocino County, 38.1 percent of children ages 2 through



11 are drinking at least one sweetened beverage or soda per day," explains Nieves. And adolescents are drinking even more, with 39 percent consuming a soda every day. "That is the equivalent of eating 39 pounds of sugar each year," says Nieves. Thirty-five percent of children ages 2 through 4 are considered overweight or at risk of becoming overweight, according to Nieves, and for kids ages 5 through 19 the number goes up to 40 percent. "Our motto is Take Back the Tap," says Nieves - pointing to the importance of drinking the most healthful beverage of all: water. Nieves says that the low cost and easy access to sweetened beverages, along with aggressive marketing and peer pressure, lead to children selecting and craving unhealthy drinks.

Even among adults, myths abound surrounding the perceived need for hydration and the definition of a "healthy" beverage. Nieves recounts the story she was told by a "soccer mom" who was asked to bring snacks for her son's team. She planned to bring bottled water, but the coach "insisted" she bring a sports drink like

Gatorade. "Unless your children are on the high-school cross country team and are exercising at a high level for two hours or more, chances are they will not need electrolyte replacement," notes Nieves.

And what about the sugar content in sports beverages? Twenty ounces of Original Gatorade contains 9 teaspoons of

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sugar.

Nieves finds many parents do not realize how much sugar their children are consuming. Many foods contain hidden sugar: chips, fast-food meals, yogurts, boxed cereals, muffins and even condiments. One tablespoon of ketchup contains a teaspoon of sugar, and a McDonald's Deluxe Breakfast with a regular sized biscuit contains a whopping 12 teaspoons of sugar.

The most insidious culprit - high fructose corn syrup - is found in many prepared and processed foods and beverages. Trotter explains that this substance is metabolized by the body in a completely different fashion than sugar - going immediately into fat production. According to Dr. Trotter, the average American consumes 26 pounds of high fructose corn syrup annually. Just 30 years ago, that number was zero.

What can parents do to protect their children? Reading labels carefully is one of the simplest ways to limit the amount of sweetened products coming into the home. "People buy Sunny Delight because they think it's orange juice. Sixteen ounces contains 15 teaspoons of sugar."

"One hundred percent fruit juice is better but still not the best," explains Nieves. "The suggested serving for fruit juice is 6 ounces - a lot less than most kids drink. Those are not empty calories, but parents need to have kids rinse their mouths after they drink, to reduce cavities."

Perhaps the most dangerous beverages on the market are the so-called energy drinks, because of the double-whammy effect of caffeine and sugar. "A Monster energy drink has the caffeine equivalent of 20 cups of coffee and 13 teaspoons of sugar," says Nieves.

Nieves encourages parents to refrigerate and refrigerated. Cucumber-mint or bottles of water. "Get informed events," urges Nieves.

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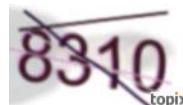
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