

Broughton, Fairchild & Morgan. A survey of sports drink consumption among adolescents. *Br Dent J* 2016; 220:639-643

Widespread use of sports drinks in Welsh adolescents risks harming health

This paper from the Cardiff group is important as it is a well-designed snapshot of sports drink use by adolescents. Sports drinks are typically used to supply carbohydrates during physical activity or for hydration (1) As the authors of this paper point out, whilst performance in some elite sports may be improved by such supplements, there is little evidence of a benefit for recreational sport. The researchers took pains to involve their target group (12-14 year olds) in the design of the study through a focus group and to represent the socioeconomic spectrum in those assessed. Furthermore, almost 90% of questionnaires were returned.

The findings are stark: nearly 90% used sports drinks with half dinking more than once per week. More than three quarters of boys and almost half of girls cited physical activity as the situation in which they used sports drinks although less than half cited energy or hydration as the reason for use: taste was the overwhelming reason for consumption.

Why should we be concerned? Sports drinks for energy replacement typically contain more than 30g sugar which is more than the daily total recommended sugar intake for this group. (2) The risks to health from weight gain are substantial (3) and even worse in disadvantaged groups. There is a clear link between these drinks and dental caries (4) which creates even greater social disadvantage and effect on life quality. Whilst many products are also acidic, the evidence for dental erosion is less clear (5) although suggestive of a role. The irony is clear; sports drinks in this adolescent population are more likely to achieve harms than performance benefits.

As the authors point out, the solutions are multi-agency including engagement with industry, schools, parents and carers, sport and leisure organisations, levers such as the sugar tax and through health promotion by dental professionals. The message is clear; these products could harm adolescent health and are unlikely to offer benefits. Few need energy supplementation unless in high-level endurance sport and plain water is best for rehydration.

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