

The Diet-Soda Dilemma

Can zero-calorie drinks make you gain weight?

■ Maybe you should stop at one can of pop. In a new study, researchers tracked 474 older adults for nearly a decade and found that the waistlines of diet-soda drinkers expanded 178 percent more than those of people who avoided these drinks. In fact, those who drank two or more diet sodas daily saw their waistlines expand by an average of 4.7 centimeters (about 2 inches).

The problem is artificial sweeteners like aspartame and sucralose. They contain virtually no calories but have negative health effects, says researcher Helen Hazuda, Ph.D., of the University of Texas Health Science Center. "Artificial sweeteners are about 180 times sweeter than regular sugar," she says, which can make you crave (and eat) sweeter and higher-fat foods.

"If you have a diet soda, you might feel as if you can have dessert," adds Christine Gerbstadt, M.D., R.D., spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "But then you are displacing nutrient-rich foods with less healthy foods." A bad swap, since we need healthier foods as we age. That's because older adults can have decreased nutrient absorption and a higher risk for osteoporosis, Gerbstadt says. And a bigger waistline can put you at a higher risk for heart disease and diabetes.

So should you drink diet sodas? Hazuda recommends avoiding them, though if you can't, have just one per week. Other options she suggests are fresh-brewed green tea or coffee (for the antioxidants) and water with a splash of natural fruit juice. Or drink milk fortified with vitamin D to help build strong bones, Gerbstadt says. —Alyssa Morones

