

# Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

## Soft Drinks Have No Place in Schools

Alarming, soft drink consumption has increased by 300% in 20 years. The serving sizes have also risen from 6.5 oz. in the 1950s to 20 oz. by the late 1990s. Between 56% and 85% of children in school consume at least 1 soft drink daily (higher in boys). Among this group, 20% consume 4 or more drinks each day.

At the societal level, soft drinks and fruit drinks are sold in many places including schools, workplaces, arenas, malls, and even in health care settings. On the surface, this provides many “cash-strapped” schools and organizations with another source of revenue. But at what cost?

The main concern is that soft drink over-consumption can lead to long-term medical problems including:

### **Obesity and its associated complications**

Sweetened drinks are associated with obesity, because they are consumed in addition to meals and snacks and are really “extra calories.” A 12 oz. serving of a carbonated sweetened soft drink contains the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of sugar and 150 kcal. In children, each 12 oz. sugared soft drink consumed daily has been associated with a 0.18-point increase in body mass index (BMI) and a 60% increase in obesity risk.

### **Decreased calcium intake**

Soft drink consumption results in decreased milk consumption. Milk is the principle source of calcium and contains substantial amounts of several other important nutrients. Adolescence is an important time for bone formation and long-term storage of calcium. If calcium is not adequately stored in the bones during the teenage years, this can lead to premature osteoporosis and higher risk of bone fractures later on in life.

### **Dental caries**

Soft drinks also pose a risk of dental caries because of their high sugar content and their acidity. As a result of the rise in soft drink consumption at schools and in an effort to try to prevent the related complications, the American Academy of Paediatrics has made the following recommendations:

1. Eliminate sweetened drinks in schools and offer real fruit and vegetable juices, water, and low-fat white or flavoured milk instead.
2. Schools should invite public discussion before making any decision to create a vended food or drink contract.
3. If a school already has a soft drink contract in place:
  - Soft drinks should not be sold with the school lunch program.
  - Vending machines should not be placed within the cafeteria space, and should be turned off during lunch hours and ideally during school hours.
  - Soft drinks and fruit-flavoured drinks should be eliminated in all elementary schools.
  - Limit the number of machines selling sweetened drinks and insist that alternative healthier beverages be provided in preference over sweetened drinks.

I must, however, point out that many area schools and businesses are starting to offer healthier choices. Healthier choices today can contribute to the reduction of chronic diseases tomorrow... including diabetes, cancer, obesity and heart disease.

*Dr. Paul Roumeliotis is the Medical Officer of Health for the Eastern Ontario Health Unit and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, McGill University. © Dr. Paul Roumeliotis*