

July 13, 2005

Secretary Michael Leavitt
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Leavitt:

The undersigned scientists, health professionals, and organizations are deeply concerned about the impact of non-diet soft drinks, both carbonated and non-carbonated, on Americans' diet and health. Americans consume more than three times as much non-diet soda pop per capita as they did 50 years ago. Once marketed in 6.5-ounce containers, today carbonated soft drinks are marketed in 20-ounce and even larger single-serving containers. Once consumed as occasional treats, soft drinks are now the single biggest source of calories in the average American's diet. In 1999–2002, carbonated soft drinks and non-carbonated (fruit) drinks provided about 13 percent of the average teenager's calories.

Soft drinks may replace more nutritious foods in people's diets or add excess calories. U.S. Department of Agriculture food-consumption surveys have found that many teenagers, among others, do not consume recommended amounts of healthful foods (for example, fruits and vegetables) and nutrients (for example, calcium, magnesium, and vitamin A). Soft drinks clearly are replacing milk in many Americans' diets. In the 1970s, teenagers were consuming twice as much milk as soda pop. In the 1990s that ratio was reversed. In 1999–2002, teens drank three times as much soft drinks (carbonated and noncarbonated) as milk. The replacement of milk in the diet could portend higher rates of osteoporosis in the coming decades.

Between 1976–80 and 1999–2002, the percentage of children who were overweight doubled (6- to 11-year-olds) or tripled (12- to 19-year olds). Several recent studies indicate that increasing soft-drink consumption is probably one (of numerous) contributors to weight gain in children and adults. Considering how much soda pop children drink, one might think that they are addicted to it. And well they might be, because six of the seven most popular soft drinks contain caffeine, a mildly addictive stimulant drug. In addition, non-diet soft drinks promote dental caries, and the acids in soft drinks promote dental erosion.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer-health organization, is petitioning your department, through the Food and Drug Administration, to require health messages on the labels of soft drinks. The notices would alert consumers to risks that frequent consumption of non-diet soft drinks poses, such as weight gain (and obesity-related health problems: diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, heart disease, and cancer), caries, and osteoporosis.

We urge you to review CSPI's petition carefully and require the new labeling that it seeks. Inasmuch as that action alone would not solve the problem of over-consumption of soft drinks, we also urge the Department of Health and Human Services to fund major mass-media campaigns to reduce soft-drink consumption, as well as to promote better overall nutrition.

Sincerely,

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