Debate over sugar not so sweet

By ACSH Staff — October 3, 2011

At last week’s American Dietetic Association conference, two prominent professors of nutrition debated the link between consumption of sugary beverages and the rising obesity rate. The question is a contentious one, not least because it is sugar that policymakers and health experts most frequently target in efforts to combat the obesity epidemic. However, as the heated discussion between Dr. Theresa Nicklas and Dr. Barry Popkin demonstrated, a causal relationship between sugared drinks or added sugar in general and obesity is far from clear.

Dr. Nicklas, professor at the Children’s Nutrition Research Center at the Baylor College of Medicine, discussed evidence showing that focusing public health efforts on any single ingredient or product group will have little effect on the obesity epidemic. She pointed to a just-published study that shows that, while Americans consumption of caloric sweeteners in general and sugary sodas in particular has dropped by over 20 percent, the obesity rate continues to climb. Thus, said Dr. Nicklas, to tax or restrict the sales of such products is the wrong approach. We’re fighting the wrong battle here, she observed. We need a total diet approach.

Yet Dr. Barry Popkin, professor of nutrition at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, remains convinced that calories from sugared drinks are very much to blame for the obesity epidemic. He asserted that, because calories from such beverages do not make us feel as full as solid foods, they quickly amount to excess calories. Dr. Popkin’s final salvo was a comparison of sugar’s deleterious effects on public health to those of tobacco a common yet flawed analogy, as ACSH has often noted.

ACSH’s director of nutrition, Dr. Ruth Kava, and medical director, Dr. Gil Ross, are in agreement with Dr. Nicklas. Dr. Nicklas has, of course, hit the nail on the head, says Dr. Ross. Arbitrarily singling out just one dietary component is not going to make a difference when it’s an entire spectrum of dietary choices that leads to obesity. Dr. Kava also noted that, while it’s true that excess calories from sweetened drinks can contribute to obesity, even eliminating that source alone would not necessarily decrease caloric intake: There are too many other easily accessible sources of calories, she says.
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