

Young People and Diet: Low sugar soft drinks can improve young people's diets

The recent publication of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey of young people (aged 4 - 18 years) in the United Kingdom has given all of those interested in food, health and diet a new databank of statistics to analyse and interpret. Undertaken as part of a programme which will cover all age groups, this survey provides the most comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the dietary habits, nutrient intakes and nutritional status of British young people.

At a time when childhood obesity, dietary disorders and the quality of childrens' diet receive widespread media coverage, it is perhaps some comfort to know that few British children are likely to suffer from the quantity or content of their diet. Of far more concern is the fact that they are getting far too little exercise, particularly once they reach their teens.

Of course, a key issue is the balance of the diet, rather than simply the amount of energy consumed, and it is here that the survey provides some very interesting findings.

Boys derived 51.6% of their energy intake from carbohydrates while girls get 51.1% of their energy intake from this source. However the nature of these carbohydrates leaves room for some improvement. Simple sugars (NMES - Non-Milk Extrinsic Sugars) accounted for 16.7% of energy intake for boys and 16.4% for girls - this exceeds the recommended average of 11% set by COMA (Committee for Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy). The main source of NMES intake is carbonated soft drinks which account for almost a quarter of NMES in older boys and girls. A switch to low or no sugar soft drinks could have a significant impact, not least on the incidence of dental caries.

Carbonated soft drinks are by far the most popular beverages among young people, with full sugar products consumed by three quarters of the survey sample, though market figures show that juice drinks are gaining significant 'share of throat'. New low and no sugar products in the soft drink sector provide the opportunity to reduce extrinsic sugars without compromising on taste, which is very important in gaining product acceptance among children and teenagers.

For example, Britvic's new Juice Up in Smooth Orange, Sunshine Tropical and Cool Berry Flavours contains 17% fruit juice, 8% skimmed milk and 17% of the RDA for calcium (per 200ml). But it contains no added sugar and is sweetened with aspartame.