[IMAGE]

You Are What You Drink

By Carrie Wiatt

Not all calories are the same, especially when it comes to the calories you drink. Most people tend to revolve their diet plans around the foods they consume, often forgetting that what they drink on a daily basis is just as important. Countless drinks on the market tend to be very high in sugar content, which we all know eventually turns into fat, derailing our weight-loss goals.

Some drinks are also loaded with tons of calories that often can be just as high as an entire meal. Learning what drinks to watch out for and which ones to consume can make a big difference in your overall weight and health. Let's take a look at a few healthy options that can help you meet your long-term goals.

When it comes to finding the perfect drink to complement your healthy eating goals, the number-one thing you need is just five letters: water!

Water is a basic beverage that provides essential benefits like helping to digest your food properly and hydrating the body, but most importantly, it contains zero calories.

How much water should you drink, and when? When it comes to water, you should drink approximately 2 quarts (8 cups) of water a day. Most of your body (approximately 65 percent) is composed of water. Water is the most important power nutrient; without enough water, nutrients like carbs, proteins and fats can't get into your body's cells. Water helps your body work optimally and should be considered the drink of choice when pursuing long-term weight-loss goals.

soda - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark What's an easy way to get your daily water intake and start the day off right? Down two 8-ounce glasses of water upon waking to rehydrate, boost circulation, and jump-start your metabolism. Drinking water 30 minutes before a meal can help prepare the digestive system to fully absorb nutrients that will be provided in your food. Then, wait to drink water until 30 minutes after your meal to allow for full digestion.

Drinking water sounds easy, but what happens when the basic drink doesn't satisfy your taste buds? Try adding excitement to your water with cucumber, mint, a slice of lemon or orange, or even cherries when in

season. Here's an exclusive H20 pick-me-up recipe: Whip up some refreshing minty lemon cucumber water. Add 2 quarts water, one sliced lemon, half a sliced cucumber, and mint sprigs to a glass pitcher. Let steep in the fridge for 30 minutes. Serve over ice and enjoy!

If you can't do water all the time, here are a few other options to consider. Try coconut water instead of sugar-based flavored water drinks. Coconut water is advertised as "fat-free, cholesterol-free, low-calorie, super-hydrating, naturally rich in electrolytes." It is a healthy option when you need a boost of energy. On occasion, coconut water may be a beneficial choice due to its naturally high levels of potassium. Watch serving sizes, as most have about 50 calories per serving. Note: Most research shows that it shouldn't replace sports drinks for very active individuals, in whom higher levels of sodium are important.

Another great healthy choice when it comes to beverages is flavored tea. If you need to sweeten your tea, try adding a teaspoon of Stevia, a no-calorie sweetener that comes from an herb native to South Africa. Another great choice is agave syrup (also use 1 teaspoon.)

When considering beverages, it is essential to always read the nutrition facts just like you would with food. The first ingredient listed is the most common ingredient; the least common ingredient is listed last. Your drink should be mostly water or 100 percent juice, depending on the beverage. If you see sugar first on the label, watch out!

Also, make sure to watch serving sizes, indicated by "servings per container." You might think one bottle equals one serving size, but in reality you could be consuming 2.5 times the "amount per serving."

Always make sure to limit your intake of beverages that contain added sugars or artificial sweeteners such as high-fructose corn syrup, Splenda, aspartame, sucrose, sorbitol, brown rice syrup, dextrose, sucralose, etc. If you need a drink with a sweetener, stick to ones with natural ingredients such as honey or agave.

Other things to consider: Try to keep your sugar intake lower than American Heart Association's limits for added sugars: 100 calories (6 tsp) for women and 150 calories (9 tsp) for men per day. (These shouldn't be coming from beverages, since many of your foods contain sugars).

If you need that glass of juice in the morning, stick to grapefruit or orange, make sure they are 100 percent juice, and have a 4-ounce serving. Eating whole fruit is always the better choice because you get more fiber and nutrients.

So this summer, satisfy your parched taste buds with water; and if you can't forgo your favorite sip (or more) of something less healthy, do it in small amounts! Small changes can equal big results! Drink well.

Five Tips for Beverage Consumption:

1. Avoid drinking beverages that provide large amounts of calories and sugar. Many sodas, sports drinks, juices, and fruit drinks also contain corn syrup, artificial dyes, and flavorings that your body doesn't need. Stick to drinks with the fewest and most natural ingredients.

2. Lighten coffee or tea with nonfat milk instead of cream or creamer. Add flavor and brightness with a dash of cinnamon.

3. If you need a fizzy drink, add a splash of juice or lemon slices to plain sparkling water. Watch out for sodium levels in these drinks! Make sure to pick brands with no or low sodium.

4. Order the smallest size beverage available when ordering out.

5. Try not to reuse plastic bottles ,as there is a risk of bacterial growth. If you buy water in plastic bottles, transfer it to a glass pitcher or reuse glass or stainless steel water bottles.

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