

Sweet 'tea' is not a better choice

Written by Nicole Winbush MD
Thursday, 21 February 2013 12:15

When discussing food choices, one of the first questions I often ask is "What do you drink?". One of the more common answers that I have been getting lately is that people are drinking a lot of 'tea'. Often the tea that is being referred to is a sweetened (or sometimes sugar-free) bottled beverage. Many people will often drink several cups or bottles of 'tea' per day. Often, they tell me that they are drinking tea because they see it as a healthier alternative to soda. This week we talk about tea, and some of the beverages out there that pass for tea and provide some information about what is known about tea and its health benefits.

What is tea?

Tea refers to a beverage made from the dried leaves of a plant (*Camellia sinensis*) that is native to Asia. It is the major beverage of many people around the world. There are several types of tea (e.g. green, black, white, oolong) these are made by different methods of drying and preparing the tea leaves. In the US, green and black tea are the most common types. There are also herbal teas that are not made from tea leaves and often contain a mixture of dry herbs.

What is not tea?

Many people are now drinking bottled tea beverages and have been given the impression through marketing and packaging that these drinks represent a healthful alternative to soda. They are not. Many of these (sweetened tea beverages) are little more than sugar water. They contain small amounts of tea and lots of added sweeteners. One 20 oz bottle of sweetened tea often contains more than 200 calories. If you drink an average of one bottle of tea daily, that is 20 pounds of calories a year just from tea. These beverages retain little to none of the health benefits of brewed tea. They provide excess calories that are likely to contribute to weight gain and increase your risk of developing diabetes and other chronic health conditions. Sugar free bottled teas may have few to no calories but artificial sweeteners may actually encourage your body to eat more due to their overly sweet flavor which has been shown to stimulate your appetite.

What are the health benefits of tea?

Brewed tea contains chemical compounds called anti-oxidants and are especially rich in one form of anti-oxidant called catechins. These catechins are highest in green tea but are also present in black tea and to a lesser extent in decaffeinated tea. Bottled tea beverages contain almost none of these anti-oxidants. Catechins are thought to promote beneficial health effects by helping the blood vessels in the body to function better. When people drink green tea, their blood vessels have been observed to dilate more, aiding in blood flow. This may explain some of the observed health associations with regular tea consumption. For instance, drinking 3 cups of black tea daily has been shown to have modest effects on lowering blood pressure. Studies have also suggested potential benefits of regular green tea consumption on lowering stroke and heart disease risk. However, the results are not consistent or fully proven. Green tea (and more specifically chemical extracts from green tea) has been reported to aid in weight loss, weight loss maintenance and cancer prevention. However, studies have not consistently proven this.

Should you start drinking tea?

If you currently are not a regular brewed tea drinker, you could consider adding a cup or two of brewed tea to your diet everyday. It should be noted that tea (unless decaf) contains caffeine. Caffeine is a stimulant and can help people feel more alert and focused, especially in the

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morning. However, if you drink too much or are very sensitive to caffeine, it can make you feel anxious or jittery or if taken late in the day it can sometimes impair sleep. If you are a sweet tea drinker, consider switching to fresh brewed tea. It is cheaper and has some potential health benefits. If you need to add a little sweetener, consider adding a small amount of honey or sugar. This will still have many fewer calories than the bottled variety. You can also add some milk to your tea, however, be aware that this may reduce the benefits of tea on blood vessel function.

Evaluate how you hydrate

Our body needs fluids to function properly. When I am asked by patients, 'What should I drink?', my first answer is always water. However, as we have discussed brewed tea can also can be a healthful addition and can provide some variety in terms of taste.

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you: To request topics for future articles and for additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.com or LIKE Function Well Medicine on Facebook.

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