

UCLA study connects soda to obesity epidemic

SANTA CRUZ -- Policies aimed at reducing soda consumption could help reverse California's costly obesity epidemic, according to a study released today.

Researchers from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and California Center for Public Health Advocacy found adults who drink a daily soda or another sugary beverage are 27 percent more likely to be overweight than those who don't. The finding is based on data from more than 40,000 interviews in 2005.

"We drink soda like water," said Harold Goldstein of the Center for Public Health Advocacy. "But unlike water, soda serves up a whopping 17 teaspoons of sugar in every 20-ounce serving." That adds up to 39 pounds of sugar a year.

Bob Boyles, 58, of Santa Cruz, saw his weight balloon from 160 to 265 pounds when he was a roofing contractor with an eight-bottles-a-day Diet Pepsi habit. He shed pounds after he changed jobs, cut down on soda and started his day with a morning jog.

Obesity is not only a personal matter but also a public health problem. The advocacy center has calculated obesity costs California \$21 billion a year for health care. The American Beverage Association contends soda alone can't be blamed for obesity.

Last month, when the American Heart Association called for a limit on sugar, the beverage trade group issued a statement saying, "Soft drinks and other sugar-sweetened beverages are a source of calories, but in and of themselves, they are not a unique risk factor for obesity or other negative health outcomes."

In Santa Cruz County, 56 percent of teens, 41 percent of children ages 11 and under and 15.5 percent of adults drink a soda per day. Information on children is based on interviews with parents.

Kathleen McCarthy, who heads the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust in Watsonville, called the data "alarming" but not a surprise. Her organization has invested more than \$400,000 since 2001 to change the situation.

The task is enormous. Statistics from 2007 found 39 percent of Pajaro Valley Unified School District seventh-graders were overweight or at risk of being overweight and that 64 percent of Pajaro Valley adults were overweight or obese.

The health trust is part of a countywide coalition, Go for Health, promoting healthy lifestyles. One strategy is a social marketing campaign called "52-10," in which the zero refers to eliminating sugary drinks from the everyday diet.

The Institute of Medicine, which provides evidence-based advice to policymakers, this month recommended a soda tax as part of a 15-point action plan for local governments to prevent obesity.

A significant tax on soda would reduce the amount of soda consumed and raise money for health care, said McCarthy, who supports limiting fast food restaurants near schools.

Schools countywide restrict access to soda and sugary beverages, but that is not enough, Watsonville High School Principal Murry Schekman said.

Many of his students buy lunch at nearby stores and restaurants, choosing soda and chips. "We need to provide a steady stream of information to students and families so they can very much understand the real dangers of sugar-sweetened products," Schekman said.

Women Infants and Children, the federally funded nutrition program, also is trying to reduce soda consumption. Changes taking effect Oct. 1 eliminate juice for infants and add vouchers for \$6-\$10 to buy fruits and vegetables. Water and milk that is low-fat or nonfat are recommended instead.

"By feeding infants breast milk and water only, there is less opportunity to develop an early taste for sweetened beverages," said Cathy Cavanaugh, the program's Santa Cruz County program director.