New Information About the Benefits of Drinking Water Compared With Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

Water is essential for human life. It prevents dehydration and is an important source of a nutritious diet. Research scientists have been studying how drinking water compared with sugar-sweetened beverages, such as soda or juice, affects children’s health.

A new study in this month’s JAMA Pediatrics describes an intervention in New York City public elementary and middle schools. This quasi-experimental study included more than 1,000,000 students in these schools. It was performed after New York City schools banned artificial flavors, colors, or sweeteners in all beverage vending machines and limited beverages to those that had less than 10 cal per 8 oz. As part of this new program, the school installed water jets in school cafeterias.

Water jets are electrically cooled, large clear jugs that can provide a fast stream of cool water. The schools provided plastic cups for students to use with the water jets. The researchers wanted to know whether the change from sugar-sweetened beverages in vending machines to water jets would affect the students’ weight. They found that the adoption of water jets was associated with a reduction in the average weight of students as measured by body mass index (calculated as weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared). The researchers also found that there was a decrease in the likelihood of being overweight. These changes happened after the sugar-sweetened beverages were removed from the schools and the water jets were placed in the school cafeterias.

This research study and others before it strongly support the health benefits of children drinking water. Staying hydrated at school with water can lead to increased cognitive focus. Drinking water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages can lead to a lower risk of being overweight. On the other hand, drinking sugar-sweetened beverages increases the likelihood of dental cavities and tooth decay and of being overweight or obese.

Strategies to Help Your Child Enjoy Drinking Water

- Serve water at meals and during snacks so that your child gets used to drinking water when he or she is thirsty.
- Buy a reusable water bottle that your child can take to school. You do not need to buy bottled water; tap water is perfectly fine and has fluoride to help protect your child’s teeth, whereas bottled water has little if any fluoride.
- Do not buy sugar-sweetened beverages to keep at home; not having them around can help your child to choose to drink water. However, if you do choose to buy them, then purchase small quantities to provide as an occasional treat rather than as an everyday beverage.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- See the research study in this month’s JAMA Pediatrics.

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