

Sugary Drinks Linked to More Than 330,000 Deaths a Year

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Sugar-sweetened beverages are linked to 338,240 deaths annually and contributed to 2.2 million new Type 2 diabetes cases in 2020, representing about 1 in 10 cases globally
- Sugary drinks cost the world 12.5 million healthy years of life in 2020 and are associated with 1.2 million new cardiovascular disease cases, or about 1 in 30 cases
- Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa face the highest health impacts, with some countries attributing nearly half of new diabetes cases to sugary drinks
- Processed fructose, especially high-fructose corn syrup in sweetened beverages, overwhelms your liver, promotes fat storage, and contributes to insulin resistance and fatty liver disease
- Unlike natural sugars in whole fruits, added fructose in drinks lacks fiber and nutrients, delivering a concentrated sugar load that disrupts metabolism and drives chronic disease

You grab a soda or energy drink without a second thought, but those tasty sips are hiding a big health bill. Most of these drinks are sweetened with refined fructose — typically in the form of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) — which causes serious long-term health damage.

Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are everywhere, and they're causing trouble worldwide. If you want to stay well and avoid chronic disease, it's important to understand how sugary drinks hurt your health, where they hit hardest, and what you can do about it.

SSBs loaded with added sugar include things like sodas, energy drinks, fruit punches and sweetened lemonades. They're not 100% fruit juices or iced tea with no sugar. Here's a jaw-dropper: one can of soda packs 10 teaspoons of sugar.¹ Picture dumping that into your morning tea. That's way more sweetness than your body needs in one go.

Why Processed Fructose Is a Danger to Your Health

Not all sugars behave the same in your body — and fructose, when stripped from whole foods and concentrated in drinks or snacks, causes unique problems. Unlike natural fructose in fruit, which is slowly digested with the help of fiber and nutrients, processed fructose hits your system hard and fast. This sudden flood forces your liver to work overtime and sets off a cascade of stress responses throughout your body.

- **Whole fruits are not the issue** — When you eat fruit, the natural fructose is bundled with fiber, water and antioxidants. This slows down sugar absorption, which gives your body time to process it without stress.
- **Processed fructose is a different story** — In sugary drinks and many processed foods, fructose is separated from glucose and delivered in large amounts all at once. This includes sweeteners like HFCS.
- **Your liver takes the hit** — Unlike glucose, which is used by nearly every cell in your body, fructose is handled mainly by your liver. Too much fructose overwhelms it, forcing your liver to turn the excess into fat.

Over time, this leads to fatty liver disease, and a vicious cycle begins. When your liver is overloaded, it no longer regulates blood sugar or fats properly. This worsens insulin resistance — a key driver of Type 2 diabetes — and contributes to inflammation and metabolic disease.

- **Processed fructose ramps up mitochondrial stress** — Your mitochondria — the tiny energy factories in your cells — get overwhelmed by the byproducts of excess fructose. This creates what's known as **reductive stress**, leaving your cells less able

to make energy and more likely to get damaged.

The bottom line? It's not just the sugar itself — it's the form and source that matter. Fructose, when isolated and added to drinks and processed foods, pushes your liver and mitochondria past their limits, silently driving disease over time.

Why Should You Care?

SSBs (sugar-sweetened beverages) don't just quench your thirst — they overload your body with sugar. It's like piling extra bags onto a suitcase. At first, you might manage, but soon it's too much to carry.

When that sugar is processed fructose, your liver ends up doing most of the heavy lifting. All that **refined sugar** makes you gain weight and raise your chances of serious health problems like Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. These aren't minor issues; they're big deals that change your life.

A study published in Nature Medicine investigated SSBs in 184 countries from 1990 to 2020.² The findings? These drinks are linked to millions of new disease cases worldwide. It's not just a personal problem — it's a global one. To see how big this issue really is, let's look at the numbers.

How Do Sugary Drinks Impact Health Around the World?

The numbers tell the story. In 2020, SSBs were tied to 2.2 million new cases of **Type 2 diabetes** — almost 1 in 10 new cases globally. For heart disease, they caused 1.2 million new cases, or about 1 in 30. Imagine 10 friends getting Type 2 diabetes — one could be due to their soda habit.

That's a lot of people affected by something as common as a soft drink. Overall, the study found sugary drinks caused 80,278 deaths from Type 2 diabetes and 257,962 deaths from cardiovascular disease — that's 338,240 deaths that could have been avoided.

What Are Type 2 Diabetes and Heart Disease?

Not sure what these common diseases linked to sugary drinks are? Here's the breakdown:

- **Type 2 diabetes** — Your body struggles to handle sugar, so your blood sugar climbs too high. This leaves you tired and, over time, hurts your organs like your kidneys or eyes.
- **Cardiovascular disease** — This covers heart and blood vessel issues, like heart attacks or strokes — conditions that stop you in your tracks.

Both often sneak up on you and make life tougher than it needs to be. SSBs not only make you sick — they steal your good years. In 2020, they cost the world 12.5 million healthy years, called disability-adjusted life years. That's time you could've spent feeling great, lost to illness or even early death. It's a wake-up call about what's in your cup.

Where Do Sugary Drinks Cause the Most Trouble?

Some places feel the SSB sting more than others. For example:

- **Colombia** — Almost half of new Type 2 diabetes cases (48.1%) and 23% of cardiovascular disease cases are SSB-related.
- **Mexico** — 30% of Type 2 diabetes and 13.5% of cardiovascular disease cases.
- **South Africa** — 27.6% of Type 2 diabetes and 14.6% of cardiovascular disease cases.

That's a huge number of health problems tied to something you can buy at any corner store. Additional statistics revealed in the study also show how everyday drinks turn into major health risks.

- **Latin America and the Caribbean** — 24.4% of new Type 2 diabetes cases and 11.3% of new cardiovascular disease cases come from SSBs.

- **Sub-Saharan Africa** — 21.5% of Type 2 diabetes and 10.5% of cardiovascular disease cases are linked to these drinks.

Why are these areas hit so hard? It's a mix of factors:

- **Habits** — People often sip soda with meals like it's water.
- **Marketing** — Drink companies blast ads everywhere, making SSBs look appealing.
- **No clean water** — In some spots, grabbing a sugary drink is easier than finding safe water. In some cases, it's not just about choice — it's about what's around you.

Who's Most at Risk from Sugary Drinks?

You might think health problems hit older people most, but sugary drinks target the young, too. People aged 25 to 29 are especially at risk — 15.6% of their Type 2 diabetes cases tie back to these drinks. Why? They guzzle more SSBs. Picture a young worker chugging energy drinks or soda to power through the day. Over time, that habit leads to health trouble. Men edge out a bit here. It's close, but men might grab that extra soda can more often.

- **Men** — 10.1% of Type 2 diabetes cases link to SSBs.
- **Women** — 9.5% of Type 2 diabetes cases.

City Life and Education

Where you live and your schooling matter, too. In places like Africa and Latin America, city-dwellers and people with more education face bigger SSB risks. Why? They've got cash to spend and see ads pushing those drinks. If you're in a bustling town, you might notice soda machines everywhere — and for some, it's hard to resist.

Lifestyle and marketing also play a big role. Busy city dwellers or young men bombarded with soda ads are more likely to sip without thinking. It's not just about you — it's about what's targeting you.

How Have Sugary Drink Health Risks Changed Over Time?

A global shift has occurred in recent decades. From 1990 to 2020, SSB troubles grew a little. Type 2 diabetes cases linked to them rose by 1.3%, while cardiovascular disease cases stayed steady. It's not a huge leap, but it shows the problem isn't going away. However, zoom into regions, and the story shifts:

- **Sub-Saharan Africa** — The biggest spike — 8.8% more Type 2 diabetes cases and 4.4% more cardiovascular disease cases tied to SSBs.
- **Colombia and the U.S.** — More Type 2 diabetes cases over the years.
- **Nigeria and Russia** — More [cardiovascular disease](#) cases.

What's driving this? In some spots, sugar drinks sales are booming. In others, like Mexico, policies like taxes are slowing things down. It's a tug-of-war between habits and regulations.

What Can You Do About Sugary Drink Health Risks?

Soda and other sugary drinks are cheap, tasty and all over the place. Without a nudge, it's easy to keep sipping them. Some places are fighting back with soda taxes, as higher prices may make you think twice before grabbing that can.

- **Mexico** — A soda tax made drinks pricier, so some people skip them.
- **South Africa and the U.K.** — They've got taxes, too, nudging people away from sugar overload.

Ultimately, however, it's up to you to take control of your health and make the choice to eliminate sugary drinks and other forms of processed fructose from your diet.

Natural Sugar vs. Added Sugar — A Recap

- **Natural sugar — The good stuff** — As mentioned, not all sugar is bad. Natural sugar found in fruits and veggies comes paired with beneficial nutrients like fiber. Take an orange — it gives you sugar plus fiber to keep your energy steady and your gut happy. It's a win-win.
- **Added sugar — The troublemaker** — Added refined fructose is different. It's dumped into soda and other beverages without adding any beneficial nutrition. Refined fructose — especially in the form of **HFCS** — floods your liver with more sugar than it can safely handle. A HFCS-laden soda slams your system with processed fructose fast, spiking your blood sugar with no benefits to balance it. It's like a sugar bomb with no shield.

When consumed, HFCS's fructose component bypasses normal sugar metabolism and goes directly to your liver where it's stored as fat, while providing no satiety signals to your brain, contributing to overconsumption.

- **Why it matters** — Natural sugar in whole foods like fruit is fine in moderation — it's how nature intended. But added sugar in SSBs piles on risks like Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Next time you're craving something sweet, grab an apple over a fruit drink. Raw honey and maple syrup are also acceptable sweeteners, but make sure to choose pure varieties — not those with added HFCS.

How to Kick the Sugary Drink Habit

Want to kick soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages to the curb? The Nature Medicine study suggested several big-picture solutions, including adding warning labels about health risks to SSBs, limiting advertising to children and making clean water

accessible in schools and elsewhere. Here are additional steps to take on an individual level:

- 1. Start with swaps** — Instead of a sugary soda, try a sparkling water with a splash of juice. It's about small, manageable changes.
- 2. Hydrate with water** — Sometimes, you likely reach for a soda because you're thirsty, not necessarily because you want the sugar. Keep a glass or stainless steel water bottle with you and refill it throughout the day. Add some lemon, lime or cucumber slices for a little flavor boost. You'll be surprised how much your cravings decrease when you're properly hydrated.
- 3. Read labels** — Before you grab a drink, take a peek at the nutrition label. You'll be shocked at how much sugar is hiding in some "healthy" drinks like fruit juices or flavored tea. Understanding what you're actually consuming is a huge first step.
- 4. Find healthy alternatives you actually enjoy** — Maybe it's herbal tea, unsweetened iced tea or even just plain sparkling water. Experiment with different flavors and combinations until you find something you genuinely like. A good alternative makes it easier to resist the sugary options.
- 5. Plan ahead and be prepared** — When you're out and about, it's easy to grab a soda on impulse. Bring your own water or pack a healthy drink from home. If you know you'll be in a situation where sugary drinks are tempting, have a plan in place. Little preparations go a long way.

FAQs — Quick Answers to Your Sugary Drink Questions

Q: What Are Sugar-Sweetened Beverages (SSBs)?

A: SSBs are drinks with added sugar — sodas, energy drinks, fruit punches — not 100% juices.

Q: How Do Sugary Drinks Affect Your Health?

A: They overload you with refined sugar like high-fructose corn syrup, boosting risks for weight gain, Type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Q: Which Places Are Most Affected by SSBs?

A: Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa top the list with the biggest health hits, but the consequences are being felt globally.

Q: Are Younger People More at Risk from soda and sugary drinks?

A: Yes. Ages 25 to 29 face higher risks since they drink more — 15.6% of their Type 2 diabetes cases are linked to these drinks.

Q: What's the Difference Between Natural and Refined Sugar?

A: Natural sugar in fruit comes with fiber and is part of a healthy diet; added sugar like HFCS in SSBs has no nutritional benefits and is harmful for health.

Sources and References

- ¹ [American Heart Association, How Much Sugar Is Too Much?](#)
- ² [Nature Medicine January 6, 2025, 31, 552-564](#)