

Critics of soft-drink ads say "diet" soda makes consumers more fat than fit

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Stephen Voltz (left) and Fritz Grobe create a geyser effect from a combination of diet soda and Mentos mints. Photo: AP Photo/Diane Bondareff

WASHINGTON — Research suggests that diet soft drinks and other artificially sweetened products may actually contribute to weight gain. In response to those findings, a new advocacy group is charging Coca-Cola and PepsiCo with engaging in false advertising.

The California-based group, U.S. Right to Know, plans to file citizen petitions Thursday calling on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to stop those companies from branding artificially sweetened products with the word “diet.”

“Consumers are using products — Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi — that are advertised to make us think they assist in weight loss,” says the petition to the Food and Drug Administration. “In fact ample scientific evidence suggests that this is not true, and the opposite may well be true.”

Association Disputes Claims

The American Beverage Association, speaking for Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and other soft-drink makers, strongly disputed the assertions in the petition. It said numerous studies showed "that diet beverages are an effective tool as part of an overall weight management plan."

The petitions to be filed Thursday call for sweeping inquiries into the marketing of products that contain any artificial sweeteners. The most popular sugar substitute, aspartame, is used in more than 5,000 products.

Both Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi contain aspartame. The artificial sweetener has been mainly sold under the brand name NutraSweet and is consumed worldwide. Last year, Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi ranked third and seventh, respectively, in U.S. carbonated soft-drink sales.

Safety controversies have clouded the use of a number of artificial sweeteners for decades, especially NutraSweet and saccharin. However, Gary Ruskin, Right to Know's executive director, said his group was the first to call for investigations into possible deceptive marketing.

Some Studies Challenge Results Of Diet Drinks

It is unclear whether conflicting research on the sweeteners' effect on weight is sufficiently settled for the regulators to take action. Nonetheless, a number of recent studies have challenged the belief that ingesting noncaloric sweeteners helps with weight loss.

For example, a two-year study of 164 children, published in 2005, found that overweight kids drank more diet sodas than normal-weight children.

Another nationwide study looked at more than 10,000 children ages 9 to 14. It found that, for boys, drinking diet soda was "significantly associated with weight gains."

A 2010 review of previous research studies concluded that "artificial sweeteners may contribute to weight gain." Another review from the same year found "an association between artificially sweetened beverage consumption and weight gain in children."

Also of particular note is an Israeli study published last fall in the journal *Nature*. It found that mice given the three most popular sweeteners developed bacterial changes in their guts that caused glucose intolerance. In humans, this raises the risk of diabetes.

The researchers at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, found similar effects in a number of people who ate artificially sweetened foods for a week.

However, not all scientists are convinced.

Scientists Don't All Agree

James O. Hill, executive director of the University of Colorado Anschutz Health and Wellness Center, said he accepted the findings in the mice portion of the study. However, he disputed the methodologies of the one-week human trial.

"When it comes to weight, I am absolutely convinced that there's no way they (artificial sweeteners) are causing weight gain," he said in a phone interview. "Drinking diet sodas or using noncaloric sweeteners, in my opinion based on my review of the literature and my research, is not something people should worry about."

Hill's own study found that people who drank diet soda lost more weight than those who drank water. Hill acknowledged receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from the American Beverage Association to finance the study, but said the industry group had no role in the study design.

Right to Know acknowledges the conflicting research results in its petition. However, it points to evidence that "industry-funded studies in biomedical research are less trustworthy than those funded independently."

Petition Could Revive Old Dispute

Neither the Food and Drug Administration, which regulates food labeling, nor the Trade Commission, which polices advertising claims, would comment on the petitions.

However, trade commission spokesman Peter Kaplan said the agency "is vigilant in combating deceptive advertising."

"Deceptive health claims in particular are a priority of the agency," Kaplan said.

The petition to the FDA could bring the agency back into one of the bigger controversies in its decades of food safety regulation: its decisions in the early 1980s to approve the use of aspartame, first as a food additive and then in diet soft drinks.

There have been several research studies and books that link aspartame to health problems ranging from cancers to neurological ailments. Yet the FDA has stood by its position that the sweetener is safe, except for people who suffer from a rare disease known as phenylketonuria, a developmental illness.

Quiz

1 Fill in the blank in the sentence below.

The author illustrates the problem associated with diet soda by

- (A) identifying the viewpoint of the Food And Drug Administration.
- (B) explaining why artificial sweeteners like aspartame can lead to weight gain.
- (C) identifying the relationship between diet soda consumption and weight in children.
- (D) explaining why companies like Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have advertised it as a weight-loss product.

2 Fill in the blank in the sentence below.

In the final section of the article, the author suggests that the FDA

- (A) might reconsider its position on aspartame.
- (B) is unlikely to change its rules regarding aspartame.
- (C) might reconsider its approval process for food safety.
- (D) is unlikely to respond to the petition from Right to Know.

3 What is one reason why Hill's research might be slanted or biased?

- (A) He found that diet soda can lead to weight loss.
- (B) He found that diet soda does not lead to weight loss.
- (C) His study was funded by companies that make diet soda.
- (D) His study was funded by groups that criticize makers of diet soda.

4 From the point of view of Right to Know, what is the biggest problem associated with diet sodas from Coca-Cola and PepsiCo?

- (A) They are most likely unhealthy.
- (B) They are mislabeled as healthy.
- (C) They do not lead to weight loss.
- (D) They are preferred by overweight children.

Answer Key

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