

ROOM FOR CONFUSION

LABELING OF FRUIT DRINKS, FLAVORED WATER, AND UNSWEETENED JUICES



BACKGROUND

The American Academy of Pediatrics and other leading health organizations recommend that young children should not consume sugary drinks or products that contain diet sweeteners (also known as no-/low-calorie or high-intensity sweeteners).¹ Recently released U.S. Dietary Guidelines for infants and toddlers also recommend against products with added sugar or diet sweeteners for children under age 2.² However, 25% of 1- to 2-year-olds and 45% of 2- to 4-year-olds in the U.S. consume sugary drinks on a given day.³ Despite adhering to federal guidelines, current labeling practices of children's drinks may contribute to children's consumption by providing insufficient information to parents and mislead them to believe that sweetened children's drinks are healthy choices for their young children.

METHODS

Researchers conducted an online experiment of 1,063 U.S. parents with young children 1-5 years old. Parents were shown packages of eight popular children's drinks, including sweetened fruit drinks and flavored waters and unsweetened 100% juice and juice/water blends. Parents viewed either the front-of-package alone or the front-of-package with the information panel, which includes the nutrition facts panel and ingredient list, and were asked a series of questions about the drinks.

KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of parents surveyed could not accurately identify key ingredients in the drinks, including added sugars, diet sweeteners, and/or percentage of juice.
- Parents overestimated the average percent juice content in sugar-sweetened drinks, believing that these drinks contained 22% juice, when they actually contained 3% juice on average.
- Parents were more likely to believe that statements of identity with the words "natural" and "water beverage" meant the drink did not contain added sugar or diet sweeteners and did contain juice, although they are commonly used on children's flavored water drinks that contain added sugar, diet sweeteners, and no juice.

62%

of parents could not identify most drinks that contained diet sweeteners, even when shown the information panel with nutrition and ingredient information.

53%

incorrectly believed that unsweetened 100% juice and/or juice/water blends contained added sugar, even with nutrition information and ingredient list on the information panel

RECOMMENDATIONS

Current labeling of sweetened fruit drinks and flavored waters as well as unsweetened juices does not provide adequate information for parents to identify healthier drinks for their children. Federal regulations should be updated to require clear disclosures of added sugar, diet sweeteners, and juice content on the front of product packages.

Study citation: Harris, J.L. & Pomeranz, J.L. Misperceptions about added sugar, non-nutritive sweeteners, and juice in popular children's drinks: Experimental and cross-sectional study with U.S. parents of young children (1-5 years). *Pediatric Obesity*. 2021; published online.

1. Lott M, Callahan E, Welker E, Story M, Daniels S. Consensus statement. Healthy beverage consumption in early childhood: Recommendations from key national health and nutrition organizations <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HER-HealthyBeverage-ConsensusStatement.pdf>. Updated 2019.

2. 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/>

3. Welker EB, Jacquier EF, Catellier DJ, Anater AS, Story MT. Room for improvement remains in food consumption patterns of young children aged 2-4 years. *J Nutr*. 2018;148(9S):1536S-1546S. doi:10.1093/jn/nxx053.