

Drinks that are bad for you: a clinical guide



1. Why limiting sugar-sweetened and diet beverages is important

In many countries, sugar-sweetened beverages like soft drinks are expensive and popular due to aggressive marketing. On arriving in Australia, people with a refugee background, especially children and young people, may consume these drinks frequently and in large amounts.

Health professionals working with people with a refugee background report that clients may be confused by the availability of a wide range of commercial drinks that are promoted as healthy but are high in sugar. This is especially true for drinks that masquerade as fruit juices through their names or images on their labels (e.g. fruit drinks, cordials, fruit-flavoured powders, and soft drinks with pictures of fruit). The *Australian Dietary Guidelines* discourage the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and other acidic drinks (including diet drinks and juices).

Regarding sugar-sweetened beverages, the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* state that:

- the intake of drinks containing added sugars (such as sugar-sweetened soft drinks and cordials, fruit drinks, vitamin waters, and energy and sports drinks) should be limited
- it is probable that consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks is associated with increased risk of weight gain in adults and children, and may increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- there is some evidence of an association between the consumption of soft drinks and increased risk of reduced bone strength
- kilojoules from drinks may add to total energy intake without reducing overall appetite for other foods.

Regarding dental disease, the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* state that:

- all acidic drinks, including juices, increase the risk of dental erosion
- risk of dental erosion applies equally to sugar-sweetened or diet soft drinks, since their acidity is comparable
- the more frequently foods containing added sugars are consumed, the greater the risk of dental decay
- infants do not need added sugars, and babies who fall asleep while continuing to feed from a bottle containing infant formula, fruit juice or other sugar-containing liquid can develop a severe form of tooth decay.

Regarding milk and milk alternatives, the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* state that:

- low or reduced fat milk is recommended for most people two (2) years and over
- calcium-fortified milk alternatives such as soymilk also contain moderate to good amounts of calcium and protein
- sweetened, flavoured milk provides nutrients but can be too high in kilojoules (due to added flavours and sugars) and because of this, plain milk is preferable.

Regarding fruit juice, the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* state that:

- fruit juice is not recommended for babies less than 12 months old
- eating whole fruit is preferable to drinking fruit juice due to its higher fibre, folate and vitamin C content; however, the occasional use of fruit juice may assist with nutrient intake when fresh, frozen or tinned fruit supply is limited

- fruit juice is calorie dense, and if too much is consumed it can take the place of other nutritious foods in the diet and may lead to problems such as obesity.

Regarding alcohol, the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* state that:

- there is some evidence that people who drink small quantities of alcohol may have better health outcomes than those who do not drink, but such findings are controversial
- heavy drinking has no health benefits and studies consistently report that people who have no alcohol have better health outcomes than heavy drinkers
- there is evidence to suggest a link between alcohol consumption and an increased risk of various types of cancer
- in view of the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity, limiting alcohol intake is an important strategy for maintaining a healthy weight
- alcohol consumption by pregnant women may harm the unborn baby; for women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy or breastfeeding, not drinking alcohol is the safest option
- for those who are breastfeeding and choose to drink alcohol, expressing milk before consuming alcohol is the next best option.

2. Where does water fit in?

Regarding water, the *Australian Dietary Guidelines* state that:

- it is preferable to meet most fluid needs by drinking plain water
- drinking tap water provides the beneficial effect of added fluoride for development of strong teeth and bones
- tank water and bottled waters are a useful alternative when access to tap water is limited, but these generally don't contain fluoride
- Australian tap water is cheap and meets high palatability and hygiene standards
- water and milk are the recommended drinks for children over 12 months old.



3. When should information on drinks that are harmful be provided?

Consultation with health professionals, which included dietitians and nutritionists working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and members of state and national refugee health networks, found that two thirds of survey participants thought this information should be provided somewhere between one and three months after arrival to Australia. A total of 96% of respondents reported that the message that 'Australian tap water is safe to drink, free, and a healthy choice' should be provided to refugees on arrival in Australia.

During consultation with people with a refugee background, it was generally agreed that it was most important to learn about consuming tap water on arrival. Learning about other drinks around two to three months post arrival was ideal because there were more pressing priorities than the risk of chronic disease or the development of dental caries on arrival.

4. Key messages

- a. Almost all of the drinks you can buy in Australia are bad for your health. Most have lots of sugar in them. They can hurt your teeth, make you overweight or increase your risk of getting diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure.
- b. Lots of drinks look like they are healthy for your body. Having pictures of fruit on the label doesn't necessarily mean that these drinks contain the juice from that fruit.
- c. It is better not to add sugar, honey or condensed milk to hot or cold drinks that you make yourself, or to only add a small amount.

- d. Milk, soy and nut milks, and yoghurt drinks help to develop and maintain strong teeth and bones. It is important to have the right amount of these drinks – not too little or too much.
- e. Low or reduced fat dairy products are recommended for adults and children over two (2) years old.
- f. Flavoured milks are generally high in sugar and can make you put on weight.
- g. Eating fruit is better for your health than drinking fruit juice.
- h. Tap water should be your main drink. It is safe, free, and healthy for your body.

5. Teaching session outline

- a. Using an interpreter if required, go through the messages on page 1:
 - Explain the effect of sugar-sweetened and diet beverages on health.
 - Provide examples of drinks that are harmful (pictured). You may need to explain that even though diet drinks don't have sugar, they are still bad for your teeth because they damage the hard, protective coating on teeth (enamel).
 - Mark (tick or circle) the drinks that people consume regularly.
- b. Go through the messages on page 2:
 - Milk and milk alternatives help to develop and maintain strong bones and teeth.
 - Eating fruit is better than drinking juice because the solid bits that get thrown away when making juice are very good for you. It is also very easy to drink too much juice, and this may lead to weight gain and the acid damaging your teeth. Children may also fill up on juice and not be hungry enough to eat the other foods they need to grow properly or stay healthy.
- c. Ask the person about other drinks they consume regularly and whether they add sugar or honey to them. A list of traditional drinks for the top ten countries from which Australia takes refugees, using the 2015–2016 offshore visa grants national figures, can be found at the end of this document. If required, ask the interpreter to write down the names of commonly consumed traditional drinks in the space provided on page 2. Make sure you ask about how much sugar, honey or condensed milk they add to these drinks.
- d. On page 2, get the interpreter (if required) to write or draw (if the person is not literate in their own language) any recommendations about reducing the intake of drinks that are harmful to the person's health or reducing any products they use as sweeteners.
- e. Finish the session by stressing the importance of tap water (i.e. tap water should be your main drink; it is safe, free and healthy for your body). This information should have been provided on arrival to Australia, but it is important to reinforce the message.



6. Frequently asked questions

Why aren't diet drinks a healthy choice?

Although diet drinks have almost no kilojoules/calories, they are just as acidic as sugar-sweetened drinks. This means they damage the hard, protective layer of the teeth (enamel) and make them more susceptible to decay. There is also some evidence that diet drinks are associated with weight gain, although the mechanisms are not yet clear. Diet colas also contain caffeine and phosphoric acid, which may reduce bone density.

How much sugar does the average soft drink contain?

Most soft drinks and fruit juices contain between 7 and 10 grams of sugar per 100ml – that's 6 to 10 teaspoons of sugar for each 375g can. In terms of kilojoules for someone whose weight is stable, drinking an extra can of soft drink every day can increase body weight by 8.5kg in a year.

How much milk is too much?

The [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#) provide recommendations on the average daily number of serves for each of the five food groups. This includes the *Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives, mostly reduced fat* group. Low or reduced fat dairy products are recommended for adults and children over two (2) years old. Some people, especially children, drink much more than the recommended amounts of milk. This can result in unwanted weight gain or lack of appetite for other foods that their bodies need. For those consuming milk as their only source of food from this group, the recommended intake for different ages and genders are:

Population group	Recommended number of serves	Amount of milk per day*
Toddlers (1–2 years)	1–1½	1–1½ cups (250–375ml)
Girls aged 2–8 years	1½	1½ cups (375ml)
Girls aged 9–11 years	3	3 cups (750ml)
Girls aged 12–18 years	3½	3½ cups (875ml)
Pregnant women – less than 19 years	3½	3½ cups (875ml)
Breastfeeding women – less than 19 years	4	4 cups (1 litre/1000ml)
Women aged 19–50	2½	2½ cups (625ml)
Women aged 51+	4	4 cups (1 litre/1000ml)
Pregnant women – 19 years+	2½	2½ cups (625ml)
Breastfeeding women – 19 years+	2½	2½ cups (625ml)
Boys aged 2–3 years	1½	1½ cups (375ml)
Boys aged 4–8 years	2	2 cups (500ml)
Boys aged 9–11 years	2½	2½ cups (625ml)
Boys aged 12–18 years	3½	3½ cups (875ml)
Men aged 19–70 years	2½	2½ cups (625ml)
Men aged 70+	3½	3½ cups (875ml)

* If this is the only food from the *Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives, mostly reduced fat* group.

Recommended serves are less if a person is having yoghurt, cheese or other foods within this group.

What about tea and coffee?

When calculating fluid intake, all drinks should be counted. This includes tea and coffee, which are only mild diuretics. People who have a poor iron status should avoid drinking tea with meals, and up to at least one hour after the meal.

Why is tap water recommended over bottled water?

Tap water is better for your teeth because it contains fluoride, which helps children develop strong teeth. It also protects adult teeth against decay. Bottled water does not contain fluoride. Bottled water is also expensive and the bottles are bad for the environment.

Where can I find more information on the importance of consuming fluoridated water?

The NHMRC's [Information Paper – Water fluoridation: dental and other human health outcomes](#) (July 2017) provides all the information you need.

What if a client doesn't like the taste of tap water?

If this is the case, suggest:



- leaving tap water overnight in the refrigerator or boiling it to allow the chlorine, which is used to disinfect water, to evaporate off
- flavouring water with slices of fruit, vegetables or herbs, e.g. cucumber, mint or strawberries; only add lemon and lime juice or slices for special occasions, because these can make the water acidic, which damages the teeth
- making herbal tea (but not adding lots of sugar).






When should people drink water?





It doesn't matter when water is consumed. Drinking water during meals does not dilute digestive juices or interfere with digestion. In fact, drinking water during or after a meal actually aids digestion. Water and other liquids help break down food, making it easier to go to the toilet. [See information from the Mayo Clinic on this topic.](#)

Where can I find the NH&MRC recommendations on fluid intake?

Recommendations can be found [here](#).

Country	Traditional drinks
<p>Iraq</p>  <p>A map showing Iraq highlighted in orange. Neighboring countries labeled include Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, and Egypt. The Mediterranean Sea is to the west and the Persian Gulf is to the east.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coffee is universally consumed. • Tea, also known as <i>chai</i>, is consumed throughout the day and in social settings. It is taken strong and black with lots of sugar. • <i>Sharbat</i>, a chilled, sweet drink prepared from fruit juice or flower petals. • <i>Shinēna</i>, a cold beverage of yoghurt mixed with cold water, sometimes with a pinch of salt or dried mint added. • Little alcohol is available because Iraq is primarily a Muslim country. The main alcoholic drinks are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>arak</i>, a clear, colourless, unsweetened, aniseed-flavoured, distilled alcoholic drink. It is generally mixed with water and served with ice. – beer. • Milk. <p>(Please note: It is important to be discrete when discussing alcohol consumption, especially with Muslim clients.)</p>
<p>Syria</p>  <p>A map showing Syria highlighted in orange. Neighboring countries labeled include Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon. The Mediterranean Sea is to the west and the Red Sea is to the south.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cups of tea and coffee are often drunk throughout the day and are served with lots of sugar. • Herbal teas include rose hip and camomile, and spiced teas with walnuts. • <i>Mate</i>, made from the yerba mate plant, is widely consumed and may be drunk in large quantities. Sugar and cardamom may or may not be added. • Cold drinks include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>ayran</i>, a cold, salted yoghurt beverage mainly drunk in summer and during Ramadan – <i>jallab</i>, a fruit syrup made from carob, dates, grape molasses and rose water; it is usually sold with crushed ice and floating pine nuts and raisins – Syrian mint lemonade (sometimes called <i>bolo/polo</i>), made from fresh lemon juice, mint leaves, sugar and water – tamarind drink, made from dried and soaked tamarind and sugar – <i>erek el-sous</i>, distilled from the roots of liquorice plants and generally unsweetened. • Alcoholic drinks include <i>arak</i> (a clear, aniseed-flavoured liquor made from grapes, which is generally diluted with water and ice), wine, and Syrian and imported beer. <p>(Please note: It is important to be discrete when discussing alcohol consumption, especially with Muslim clients.)</p>

Country	Traditional drinks
<p>Iran</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tea is universally drunk and is provided to guests on arrival. Iranians traditionally put a sugar cube or rock candy in the mouth before drinking tea. • Green and herbal teas are drunk for health reasons. • Iran's traditional coffee is served strong and sweet. Turkish coffee is also popular. • <i>Dough</i>, a salty, cold yoghurt drink. • Pomegranate juice and carrot juice. • Sherbet, a fruit syrup. • <i>Aragh</i>, flower essence beverages. • <i>Khakshir</i>, a cold, sweet drink with small seeds added. • <i>Sekanjebin</i>, a cold drink made from honey and vinegar. • Alcohol is prohibited, so all drinks and beverages are non-alcoholic, although some non-Muslim minorities are allowed to produce alcoholic beverages for their own use.
<p>Afghanistan</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tea, with added sugar. • Fruit juice and soft drink, especially among younger people. • <i>Doogh</i>, a salty yoghurt drink containing cucumber, is mostly consumed in summer. <p>(Please note: Some young Afghan people may drink alcohol, even though this is against Islam. Be discrete when asking about alcohol, and explain why the question is important.)</p>
<p>Myanmar</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water. • Burmese tea (green), usually drunk without milk and unsweetened. • Coffee, often with condensed milk but no sugar. • Fermented milk drink. • Alcoholic drinks include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – locally produced rice wine (reported by the Karenni people in Brisbane) – beer and a range of spirits.
<p>Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water is consumed with all meals. • Alcoholic drinks may be consumed by those who do not follow the Muslim faith. Drinks include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>lotoko</i> or <i>pétrole</i>, made from banana or sorghum; this drink has important social value for the Congolese, who believe that it unites people and fosters friendship – palm wine, made from palm tree sap – <i>linguila</i>, a wine made from fermented sugar cane – white elephant, a popular alcoholic drink made from rum, coconut and milk.
<p>Bhutan</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Suja/sura</i>, Tibetan-style tea, made from butter and salt with or without milk powder. • <i>Ngaja</i>, a sweet milk tea. • (Imported) instant coffee is a newly adopted drink. • Alcoholic drinks include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>ara/arag</i>, a distilled or fermented drink made from rice, maize, millet or wheat – <i>chang</i>, a home-brewed local beer – wine and a range of locally produced spirits.

Country	Traditional drinks
<p>Somalia</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black tea or coffee with sugar. • Somali tea is a traditional spiced drink made from black tea, cardamom, cloves, ground ginger, cinnamon and large amounts of sugar. • Camel, sheep, goat or cow's milk. • Water.
<p>Ethiopia</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Jebena buna</i>, strong espresso coffee consumed black with lots of sugar and milk coffee. • Tea. • Thick fruit juices with water and sugar. • <i>Atmet</i>, a barley and oat-flour based drink that is cooked with water, sugar and <i>kibe</i> (Ethiopian clarified butter). This drink is often given to women who are breastfeeding. • Traditional alcoholic beverages include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>talla/tella</i>, home-brewed beer based on barley – <i>tej</i>, made from fermenting honey – <i>kaitaka</i>, pure grain alcohol.
<p>Eritrea</p> 	<p>Most cultural groups have their own traditional beverages, with Christians drinking alcoholic beverages and Eritrean Muslims generally abstaining from these.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bun</i>, black coffee with lots of sugar added. The coffee ceremony is an important symbol of hospitality. • <i>Shahi</i>, black tea with lots of sugar. • Traditional alcoholic beverages include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Siwa</i>, <i>Daga</i> beers – <i>mess</i>, a fermented drink made from honey – <i>sewa/suwa</i>, a fermented drink made from various grains – <i>caticala</i>, a strong spirit made in the lowlands. • Fruit juices (banana, mango and papaya). • <i>Abake</i>, a non-alcoholic alternative produced by the Eritrean Muslims.
<p>Sudan and South Sudan</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black or white tea, usually with added sugar. • Strong black coffee, served with sugar that may be spiced. • <i>Karkaday</i>, a herbal tea made from hibiscus flowers. • <i>Hilo murr</i>, a dark-brown drink made from dried maize, herbs and spices, with sugar added to taste. • Fruit juices, including guava, mango, orange and grapefruit. • Alcoholic drinks are officially banned under strict Islamic law.

* Using 2015–2016 national figures. Countries ordered by geographical region.



**Queensland
Government**

 *Healthy New Communities*
Metro South Health

Created in partnership with the Culturally & Linguistically Diverse NEMO Group

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