Sugar fix
Give your health a boost by canning the soda habit
By Lisa Rykman

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Take a spoonful of sugar and dump it on the table. Do that nine times. What do you have?

Yes, you've got a mess, and no, I'm not cleaning it up for you. The point is, you also have the maximum daily allowance of sugar recommended by the government for someone eating 2,000 calories a day - and the amount of sugar contained in one 12-ounce can of soda pop.

Just thinking about it is enough to make your teeth hurt.

Last year, Americans spent $66 billion on 15 billion gallons of pop, the equivalent of 60,000 empty calories for every man, woman and child, according to an updated version of Liquid Candy, the Center for Science in the Public Interest's pop-damning report.

"What was once a rare treat in a small serving is now served up morning, noon and night, virtually everywhere Americans happen to be," CSPI Executive Director Michael Jacobson says. "How did a solution of high-fructose corn syrup, water and artificial flavors come to be the default beverage?"
At Leslie Joseph's Aurora home, it starts when her husband walks in the door with a 24-can case from the grocery.

"No matter how many pops are brought into our house, they're all consumed in 24 hours," says the mother of three teenagers. "It doesn't matter what brand, what kind - they're all gone in a day. The case is empty in the fridge, and nobody seems to know who drank it."

Recently, soft drink consumption has actually dropped: Americans consume 18 fewer 12-ounce cans of pop annually than they did in 1998, the American Beverage Association says. Consumption of diet soft drinks has increased, which is why the number of per-serving calories has fallen by 16 percent.

Despite that, we still consume more fizzy soft drinks than any other single food item. And while adults are bad, kids are worse and boys worst of all.

Teenage boys who drink soft drinks guzzle an average of three cans a day. One out of every 10 boys consumes 66 ounces - nearly six cans a day, or about 800 calories. One out of 20 throws back seven cans a day. If you reduce that to sugar, it's about 23 tablespoons, nearly 1 1/2 cups.

The problems with pop come in a variety of flavors: empty calories, tooth decay and caffeine dependence, to name three. This month, CSPI asked the federal government to put health notices on all non-diet soft drinks that contain more than 13 grams of refined sugars per 12 ounces (the typical 12-ounce soda contains three times that much).

CSPI suggests messages such as "The U.S. Government recommends that you drink less soda to help prevent weight gain, tooth decay and other health problems." Or "To help protect your waistline and your teeth, consider drinking diet sodas or water." Or how about "Drinking soft drinks instead of milk or calcium-fortified beverages may increase your risk of brittle bones (osteoporosis)."

Pepsi addict Alisha Brown, 26, says the warnings might help her kick her six-can-a-day habit.

"It would probably make me feel guilty," says Brown, who has upped her intake since she began work at the Stapleton Foundation three years ago. Trying to dump the cola monkey on her own hasn't worked.
"It's terrible, I know, but I'm working on it," says Brown, who doesn't drink alcohol or coffee - she has a morning Pepsi - and would rather drink nothing than touch Coke. "Everybody gets cocktails, I get a Pepsi. Pepsi is like my drug - literally."

CSPI believes caffeinated drinks should be labeled with the number of grams of caffeine and a warning that it is a "mildly addictive stimulant drug. Not appropriate for children."

As the mom of two teenagers, I'm wondering if such warnings might unintentionally increase their appeal. My suggestions: "If you think your mother's not going to find out you're blowing your lunch money on soda pop, Buster, think again." Or "Remember that last trip to the dentist?"

The industry believes that labels are unnecessary because nutrition breakdowns on cans already give people plenty of info to ignore.

"Where would such a food 'hit list' stop?" says Susan Neely, president of the American Beverage Association. "Even skim milk and thousands of other food products could potentially fit into a CSPI labeling scheme because of the sugars contained in those products."

(While it's true that 12 ounces of skim milk contains 18 grams of sugars, they aren't additives. It also contains 12 grams of protein and healthy doses of calcium and vitamin D.)

CSPI recommends a tax on soda - say, 2 cents a can, which could raise $3 billion a year to promote health and fitness. The group also wants required labeling of beverages on chain-restaurant menus and a ban on the sale of sodas and sugary drinks in schools.

There has been a pop machine in the cafeteria of every school her children have attended, Joseph says.

"And these aren't cans, they're the 20-ounce bottles. And when their machine's not working, the teachers let the kids go in the teachers lounge and use that machine."

Joseph used to drink at least two pops a day. "Sunkist orange - it's my favorite thing in the world," she says.

She stopped when she got a new job, and the result surprised her.
"I lost 30 pounds," Joseph says. "I've gone from a size 14 to a size 8."

It makes sense. Replace two cans of soda a day with water and save 300 calories. In just under a year, that's a loss of 30 pounds.

Dietitians say that soft drinks can be part of your diet - under control.

"We don't want to think of food as good foods and bad foods," says Suzanne Farrell, a Denver dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "It can be included - but not 'in place of.' If you're drinking soda as a snack, that sometimes might replace more nutritious choices, like a glass of lowfat milk that would offer protein and calcium. When I'm looking at a child's diet, I want to make sure they're getting a balance of nutrients."

The pop-fat link became clearer after a study of 548 Massachusetts middle-schoolers. Researchers at Children's Hospital Boston and the Harvard School of Public Health found the odds of kids becoming obese increased 1.6 times for each can or glass of sugar-sweetened soft drink consumed above the daily average. Beverages included soda, iced tea, Hawaiian Punch, lemonade, Kool-Aid and other sweetened fruit drinks.

During the study, 57 percent of the children increased their daily intake of sugar-sweetened soft drinks, more than half by nearly a full serving.

But getting your kids to cut back means doing it yourself. A University of Minnesota study found that kids whose parents drink soft drinks were three times more likely to drink soda five or more times a week compared with kids whose parents didn't.

"Don't tell kids to choose lowfat milk or water when they don't see you doing that," Farrell says.

In that study, 30 percent of the children had soft drinks every day; only 18 percent reported drinking less than once a week. And 85 percent of the students said they typically drank regular soft drinks, not diet.

If you want your kids to drink fewer soft drinks, keep them out of the house (the drinks, not the kids).
"I ask parents what are the first few things their child might see when they open up the refrigerator: milk and 100 percent fruit juice, or the soda in front of it," Farrell says. "We're creatures of habit. We eat what we see the most of."

The fact that Joseph's kids see less soda at home these days has had an unexpected benefit: They're exercising more.

"They constantly want to walk to 7-Eleven," their mom says, "to get something to drink."

Pop a top on health

Getting kids to kick the soda habit starts with parents who limit their own consumption. Here are some other tips to help wean the family from sugary drinks:

• Go cold turkey. Start the school year by getting rid of all the soft drinks in the house, and let your kids know that they'll be reserved for special occasions.

• Explain why you're canning the soda. Try this: Have your kids measure out the amount of sugar in one 12-ounce can of soda - about 9.5 teaspoons, or one-quarter cup. They'll get the message.

• Have alternatives ready. Fill a pitcher with water and keep it in the refrigerator. Keep 100-percent juice in the house. Make your own lemonade or decaf tea with artificial sweeteners. Noncaloric flavored water is another option.

• Encourage kids to choose milk, juice or water when eating out.

• Send your kids to school with a bottle of ice water or frozen 100-percent juice boxes that will be thawed by lunchtime. Work with schools to offer healthier options.Source: American Dietetic Association

Ryckmanl@RockyMountainNews.com