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Diet Sodas Contribute to Obesity

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

Researchers at the University of Texas Health Science Center have found that consumption of sugar-free sodas has an unwelcome consequence: it can dramatically increase the risk of obesity.

In a study of more than 1,500 people over eight years, the researchers determined that the risk of obesity increases by 41 percent for every can or bottle of diet soda a person consumes each day.

One possible explanation is that the sweetness of diet soda promises the body calories that the product doesn't deliver. This in turn stimulates cravings, encouraging the body to seek the missing calories elsewhere.

Many diet sodas contain aspartame, which has been linked to a variety of health problems. Aspartame (NutraSweet) is found in aspartic acid, a neuroexcitatory amino acid. A related substance, glutamic acid, is found in the food additive monosodium glutamate.

Consumption of aspartame and/or MSG can trigger a host of symptoms, including migraine headaches, fatigue, muscle aches, abdominal complaints and "brain fog." Evidence suggests that prolonged exposure to these substances also might contribute to the development of neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. Well-known actor Michael J. Fox, who developed Parkinson's disease at an early age, reportedly consumed large amounts of diet soda.

The new Alzheimer's drug Namenda blocks the NMDA (–methyl-D-aspartate) receptor in the brain. It so happens that this is the same receptor that is stimulated by aspartic acid and glutamic acid. That raises an important question: Could prolonged exposure to aspartic and/or glutamic acid contribute to early Alzheimer's?

Avoiding diet soda isn't hard, but avoiding MSG can be. Many people associate MSG with Chinese food, but it is now found in the vast majority of prepackaged and processed foods. Many other food additives also contain MSG; for example, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, modified food starch, and natural flavors. Although these additives don't trigger symptoms in everyone, they are a contributing factor in many medical complaints. The best way to avoid MSG is to eat "the food, the whole food and nothing but the food."

The University of Texas study points to yet another reason to avoid these substances.

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University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, Dr. Guillory is actively involved in teaching medical students, resident physicians, and nurse practitioner students. He has lectured extensively on the role of nutrition and disease. Over the years, he has fostered an interest in patient education and has authored three books on digestive troubles. He also has served as medical director of a Colorado-based health plan and as a health consultant to employer groups.