

Fruit juice not linked to obesity

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Score one for fruit juice.

For years, parents have been getting the message that for all the ills juice causes, from obesity to tooth decay, they might as well be serving their kids sugary cola.

Now, researchers say that 100 per cent fruit juice is not associated with excess weight or obesity in children, and in fact kids who drink real juice tend to have healthier diets in general.

The research, released yesterday at the Pediatric Academic Societies' annual meeting in Toronto, found that children who drink 100 per cent fruit juice also eat more whole fruit and consume less fats and sugars than kids who don't.

Their juice consumption does not appear to limit their milk consumption, the researchers found.

"Children who consume 100 per cent juice had significantly better diets, higher intakes of some key nutrients," said Theresa Nicklas, the Baylor College of Medicine child nutritionist who led the study. Consumption of vitamin C, potassium, magnesium, folate, and B6 were higher among children who drank juice, she said.

Parents have been advised to limit juice for a decade, since an article published in the academic journal *Pediatrics* showed that excess juice consumption in preschool children was associated with being overweight, Dr. Nicklas says.

But that study did not have the large, national data set that Dr. Nicklas and her team used. The recent study looked at the dietary intakes of 3,618 U.S. children between the ages of 2 and 11 using data collected by the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, the same database used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to confirm the rise in obesity rates in the United States.

Dr. Nicklas said she wasn't surprised by the results, which mirrored findings she and her colleagues published last year. What was surprising, she said, was how few kids are drinking juice. "Fifty-seven per cent of all children aged 2 to 11 were not drinking any 100 per cent juice at all," she said before the meeting.

Still, pediatricians and dietitians may hesitate to push juice on patients, said Dr. Bob Issenman, president of the Canadian Pediatric Society and chief of pediatric gastroenterology and nutrition at McMaster Children's Hospital in Hamilton.

While 100 per cent fruit juice is a healthy food source, especially when consumed with a balanced breakfast, it is also high in sugar and vivid in colour, making it enticing to children as an all-day drink - and leading them to drink more than the children did in the recent study.

In the study, the mean amount children drank daily was four ounces - half a cup - which is in keeping with new Canada Food Guide recommendations for small children and guidelines set by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Dr. Issenman said.

In the real world, portion control is a challenge, especially when school vending machines sell only large bottles, he said. "It's not four ounces, not six or eight ounces, but 10 to 12 or more ounces. It's part of the pattern of over-consumption in our society."

Too much juice can have negative effects, including chronic diarrhea, tooth decay and excess weight. "It's taken a generation for pediatricians and dietitians to realize this and ask families to put limits on juice," Dr. Issenman said.