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Same heart risk found in diet soda, sugary soft drinks

Study's conclusions disputed by some

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Frequent diet soda drinkers might save calories, but they face the same higher risk of heart disease and diabetes as people who drink sugary soft drinks every day, a study says.

Scientists studying about 3,500 middle-aged men and women as part of a long-term heart research project found an association between daily soft drink consumption and an increased risk of developing metabolic syndrome, according to a report published Monday in *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association*.

People with metabolic syndrome have a combination of risk factors for diabetes and

heart disease, such as high blood pressure and elevated triglycerides.

The analysts considered other factors as well, such as whether the people had high-calorie diets or sedentary lifestyles. But the report falls short of proving exactly who or what should take the blame for the potential health problems, said Dr. Ramachandran Vasan, senior author of the Framingham Heart Study.

"One of the important questions is, 'Is it the soda drinker or the soda?'" said Vasan, who teaches at Boston University School of Medicine.

The study adds to an array of research associating the consumption of both diet and regu-

SODA CONSUMPTION



Soft drink consumption rose 26 percent between 1985 and 2006 with the majority of those drinks being regular soda.

U.S. soft drink consumption

In gallons per person, per year



Soft drinks produced, 2006

10.2 billion cases

70.5%

Regular

29.5%

Diet

Source: Beverage Digest

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lar sodas with childhood obesity and increased risk of high blood pressure in adults. The authors did not make any specific recommendations because more research is needed to clarify or confirm the findings, he said.

"In this group of middle-aged adults, consumption of just one or more soft drinks per day seemed to increase the risk of developing metabolic syndrome by about 50 percent," whether the drink was artificially sweetened or not, Vasan said.

When compared with those who drank less than one soft drink daily, participants who drank one or more a day had about a 30 percent greater risk of developing new-onset diabetes, being overweight and having low levels of good cholesterol.

Yet critics such as Dr. Dean Ornish contend that frequent soda consumption has been unfairly singled out in this study and others.

"I imagine if they looked at chocolate chip cookies and did the same analysis, they would find the same thing," said Ornish, the founder and director of the non-profit, Sausalito-based Preventive Medicine Research Institute.

It doesn't make sense that two people who drink beverages with very different calorie counts would have a similar likelihood of gaining weight, he said.

However, soda drinking is among unhealthy behaviors that contribute to metabolic problems, Ornish said. The study confuses contributory factors with actual causes of disease, he said.

It's the same argument made by representatives of the American Beverage Association.

"You can overconsume any food with calories, and you're going to have the potential for health consequences, so we al-

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- Dr. Ramachandran Vasan, senior author of the study

ways preach the need for moderation in your diet, and physical activity," association spokesman Kevin Keane said.

The trade group, which represents non-alcoholic beverage manufacturers and distributors, lambasted the study and its implications about heart disease.

"It's a complex problem, and to blame one particular food or one particular product for heart disease or other problems is just oversimplification and not accurate," Keane said.

The researchers offered several theories to explain their results, such as that the consumption of sweet drinks might condition a desire for sweeter foods or that the substance that gives soda its caramel color promotes resistance to insulin, which is needed to process calories.

Another possible reason is a controversial theory called "dietary compensation," which holds that if someone drinks a large amount of liquids at a meal, they aren't satisfied and will tend to eat more at the next meal, Vasan said.

They also said fructose corn syrup in regular soft drinks might contribute to weight gain, insulin resistance and diabetes. But the study's finding that diet and regular soda drinkers face similar risks is a curveball for the corn syrup argument because diet drinks are flavored with artificial sweeteners, Vasan said.

Without a more definitive explanation, Vasan offers only this advice to diet soda drinkers: "Consume in moderation and stayed tuned for more research."

This report includes information from The Associated Press.