Want to Stop Fatty Liver Disease? Cut Back on Sugary Drinks!

Although it seems like common sense, one of the first rigorous studies on the subject shows a clear association.

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Looking for easy ways to improve your liver health? A rigorous new study in JAMA suggests one easy fix for preventing non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) early in life: avoid sugary food and drinks, The New York Times reports.

The study looked at overweight children living with fatty liver disease and found that kids could sharply reduce the amount of fat and inflammation in their livers by cutting soft drinks, fruit juices and foods with added sugar from their diets. This may seem like common sense—but it's hugely valuable information considering that an estimated 80 to 100 million Americans are living with NAFLD. Left unchecked, NAFLD can significantly increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and heart disease as well as a more severe condition called non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), a leading cause of liver cancer, cirrhosis and liver transplants.

For the study, researchers at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta recruited 40 children with an average age of 13 who were diagnosed with fatty liver disease. Most were Latino (as a group, Latinos have a particularly high prevalence of NAFLD). Researchers then randomly assigned each child to one of two diet groups for eight weeks: One diet limited added sugars for both children and their families; those in the other group were advised to continue eating as they normally did.

Those in the experimental group replaced fruit juices, soda and other sweet drinks with unsweetened iced teas, milk, water and other non-sugary beverages. Dietitians prepared and delivered meals to the families twice a week, which helped them stick to their programs. Fruit, starches and pasta were not banned, and children were allowed to eat as much as they wanted.

By the end of the study period, kids in the experimental group reduced their sugar intake to just 1 percent of their daily calories, compared with 9 percent for the control group. They also had a 31 percent reduction in liver fat on average—in just eight weeks —and a 40 percent drop in their levels of ALT, a liver enzyme that is a common marker of inflammation.

"This is a step, it's not the final word," said Jeffrey B. Schwimmer, MD, PhD, an author of the study.

“But based on this, we would envision studies that look at whether this therapy can actually treat the disease well enough to prevent cirrhosis, end-stage liver disease and liver cancer.”

To learn more about fatty liver disease and diet, click here.

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