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In Battle of Bulge, Soda Firms Defend Against Warning

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With the federal government considering its first-ever warning that soft drinks can cause unhealthy weight gain, soda companies -- longtime icons of the US food industry -- are finding themselves increasingly on the defensive, lobbying federal officials against the warning and publicly arguing with the growing number of nutrition specialists who say the fizzy, sugary beverages play a major role in America's obesity problem.

A draft of federal dietary guidelines, now under review and expected in final form by February, says there is "positive association between the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and weight gain."

Scientists and nutrition specialists, citing increasing obesity rates, also have begun pushing to reduce soda's high profile in American youth culture, advocating a ban on soft-drink advertising during children's television shows and eliminating the beverages from schools, a child-focused approach reminiscent of efforts successfully used against tobacco makers.

In response, soft-drink companies are lobbying against school bans and are urging federal health officials to remove the proposed health warning from the dietary guidelines. Already they have succeeded in fending off tougher language against soda consumption that many scientists wanted included in the guidelines.

Americans spent more than \$60 billion on soft drinks last year. Sales have doubled during the past two decades, while the percentage of obese adults also has nearly doubled. But soda sales began stagnating last year, and the industry

asserts that soft drinks have been unfairly targeted as the nation rushes to combat obesity.

"They are a refreshment. They taste good. We've never claimed they were nutritional," said Richard Adamson, vice president of the American Beverage Association, which represents soft-drink makers. But he said there is no sound evidence linking soft-drink consumption to weight gain. "I think a sedentary lifestyle is to blame. Kids drive cars. People don't walk to work anymore."

Many nutritionists, however, contend there is ample evidence that drinking less soda will improve Americans' health overall.

"I believe that there is strong evidence linking sugar-sweetened beverages and obesity," said Dr. Carlos A. Camargo, associate professor of medicine and epidemiology at Harvard Medical School who served on the federal scientific panel that drafted the new dietary guidelines.

"Since obesity is a major health problem today and we have a modifiable behavior with which to address the problem, . . . it's unfortunate that health policy is based more on commercial interests than public health."

The panel Camargo served on has become a flash point in the debate. In 2003, Congress convened 13 nutrition and food policy specialists to draft dietary guidelines for the federal government's food programs.

Revised every five years, the guidelines have enormous sway over the nation's diet: 1 in 5 Americans gets food from the federal government in schools, prisons, the military, and antipoverty programs. Moreover, the guidelines, by setting national standards for a healthy diet, influence doctors' nutrition advice to patients, the strategies of food companies, and the practices of farmers and agribusiness firms.

The guidelines are expected to be released by February.

Health and agriculture officials in the Bush administration will review them before publication and can change them at will. Previous versions have never linked sugar-sweetened beverages, most of which are soft drinks, to weight gain or obesity, and soft-drink makers have submitted extensive written briefs to the administration arguing that the new guidelines should exclude any suggestion of a link.

After nearly a year of debate, the panel settled on this statement:

"Although more research is needed, available prospective studies suggest a positive association between the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and weight gain. A reduced intake of added sugars [especially sugar-sweetened beverages] may be helpful in achieving recommended intakes of nutrients and in weight control."

Camargo and several others on the panel, who wanted tougher language explicitly linking soft drinks to weight gain, were unhappy with the current wording, saying the warning was weakened by the inclusion of the phrase "more research is needed" as well as the overall tone.

Camargo blames the industry's lobbying of federal health and agriculture officials, as well as corporate bias by some panel members.

Seven of the 13 members have disclosed financial ties to various food industries.

The link between sugary soft drinks and obesity is far from definitive, although many nutrition scientists say the evidence is mounting.

(Nutritionists consider diet soft drinks, which have few to no calories, to be far healthier.) Last August, in the largest such study to date, Harvard researchers found that women who regularly consumed soft drinks were 83 percent more likely to develop type-2 diabetes over their lifetimes. They also found that regular soda drinkers, those drinking one or more a day, gained 17 pounds over eight years on average, compared with 6 pounds among those avoiding the drinks.

Soft-drink makers attacked the study, saying that one study is not enough to establish a soda-diabetes link. They also said the study, which was based on questionnaires completed by 91,000 nurses, did not include direct evidence indicating that soda consumption caused biological changes leading to diabetes, but rather, merely found a correlation.

Another study from Harvard, published in 2001, found that 12-year-olds who regularly drank soda were more likely to be overweight. For each additional daily serving of soda, children's risk of obesity increased 1.6 times, the study indicated. This trend held even when sedentary lifestyles and eating habits were taken into account.

Soft-drink makers argue that some nutritionists are unfairly demonizing soda, saying overall calorie consumption and exercise are far more important for weight loss than any single aspect of the American diet.

But there is growing consensus among nutritionists that eliminating soda consumption is a simple, powerful way to lose weight.

Christina Economos, a nutrition specialist at Tufts University, said:

"We're not saying soda causes obesity -- we can't say that yet. But the evidence is mounting."

Nutritionists have led the charge in at least a dozen state and local governments to push bills banning soft drinks at schools. A bill that would ban soft drinks at Massachusetts public schools is pending on Beacon Hill. Some nutrition specialists have even advocated taxing soda, like cigarettes, to discourage consumption.

"With children in particular, these drinks are heavily promoted and marketed," said Dr. JoAnn Manson of Brigham and Women's Hospital, a lead author of the August study.

Manson noted that soft drinks contain a rapidly absorbed form of sugar that does not satisfy hunger. The net effect of drinking a soda, she said, is taking in considerable amounts of calories without feeling full or deriving any nutritional benefit. A 20-ounce bottle of Coke has 250 calories.

Health concerns about soft drinks may be causing consumers to think twice. Retail US sales of soft drinks increased by 0.4 percent in 2003, to 53.8 gallons annually per American, down from the roughly 3 percent growth the industry enjoyed over the past decade, according to trade publications. At the same time, bottled water and natural fruit juice sales surged, suggesting health concerns are driving the trend.

E. Neville Isdell, the new chairman and chief executive officer of Coca-Cola Co., said in a conference call with financial analysts earlier this month that his company was looking into addressing health concerns over soft drinks.

"Carbonated soft drinks are going to be carriers of health and wellness benefits," he said. "We don't have it now, but we're looking into it."

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