caffeinated soft drinks. If you drink sports drinks or energy drinks instead of soft drinks, consider decreasing your intake as they also contain a significant amount of calories.

**Eat more whole fruit, drink less fruit juice.** Eating whole fruit provides fiber, along with satisfaction and a sense of fullness that fruit juice doesn’t provide. This is very beneficial if you are watching your weight. When giving fruit juice to children, follow these guidelines from the *American Academy of Pediatrics*: infants under the age of 6 months shouldn’t be given any juice; children ages 1 to 6 years old should be given no more than 4-6 ounces daily; older children should be limited to 8-12 ounces daily.

**Make water your beverage of choice.** As you decrease your soft drink or fruit juice intake, increase your water intake. It is important to realize that drinking too much water can also be a health concern, so don’t go overboard with your intake. If you find the plain taste of water hard to “swallow”, try squeezing in a few drops of fresh lemon, lime or orange juice in your glass. Or put slices of lemon, lime or oranges in a pitcher of water, allowing the juice time to flavor the water before drinking.

Remember that making any change can be difficult and stressful, so don’t feel that you have to change all your beverage choices overnight. Even small healthy changes will result in big health benefits!

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**Liquid Candy: Soft Drinks, Juice and the Obesity Epidemic**

One afternoon, Mrs. Johnson and her son, David, were sitting in my office telling me that a recent pediatrician’s visit had shown David’s weight to be higher than was healthy for his age. As we talked about healthy behaviors that would help David, I asked what beverages he enjoyed drinking. Along with water, he calmly stated that he drank three to four 20 ounce bottles of regular soft drinks each day. He was very surprised to learn that this added up to between 750 and 1000 calories each day! David is just one of thousands of children and adults who are unaware of how many calories they drink each day and how this is impacting their weight and their health.

According to the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, overweight (BMI 25-29.9) and obesity (BMI ≥30) has alarmingly increased in both adults and children since the mid-seventies. Over 66% of American adults and up to 19% of American children are overweight or obese. And six to eleven year olds have taken the hardest hit where numbers have quadrupled.

While medical experts debate what factors have led to this obesity epidemic, there is agreement on one factor – Americans, especially children, are drinking more calories than ever before. And soft drinks make up the greatest share of these liquid calories.
Soft drinks have had a long and interesting history in American “pop” culture. And while today most individuals would agree that limiting soft drinks is a healthy choice, this wasn’t always the case.

Because bathing in natural spring water was felt to provide healing benefits, drinking mineral water, whether natural or artificial (where carbon dioxide was added), was also considered a healthy practice. And in 1807, a Philadelphia physician began flavoring carbonated water. Soon customers were asking to take their “health” drinks home with them and the bottled soft drink industry was born.

How has a beverage that was once considered “healthy” become a suspect in the obesity epidemic?

According to the American Beverage Association, more carbonated soft drinks are consumed each year than milk, bottled water, or fruit juice. Forbes reported in June 2008 that American children are consuming 15% of their daily caloric-intake as soft drinks. And Harvard University has reported that one third of all carbohydrate calories in the American diet come from added sweeteners, especially high-fructose corn syrup.

High-fructose corn syrup may be one reason that soft drinks are a factor for obesity. This sweetener contains more calories than regular refined sugar. And research has suggested that it also reduces the body’s ability to process calories appropriately.

And there is more. In 2007, the American Journal of Public Health reported an association between soft drink intake and eating additional calories throughout the day. It was found that individuals drinking soft drinks did not compensate by decreasing their solid food intake. So at the end of the day, they ended up with extra calories.

Diet soft drinks have also been in the spotlight recently. After collecting data for eight years, the University of Texas Health Science Center found that individuals drinking diet soft drinks didn’t lose weight, but actually gained weight. The data showed a 41% increase in risk for being overweight for every can or bottle of diet soft drink consumed on a daily basis. Part of this may be that individuals often mistake diet soft drinks for “diets”. But eating a fast food meal with a diet soft drink won’t result in weight loss! And other research has shown that artificial sweeteners can cause a craving for calories. When our body is fed something that tastes like calories, but calories aren’t there, our appetite may be stimulated in response to this.

While the emphasis has been on limiting regular and diet soft drinks, it is important to note that fruit beverages, including 100% fruit juice, should also be used in moderation. While the data isn’t conclusive, there is evidence that over-consumption of fruit juice, especially in adults and children that are already overweight, may lead to further weight gain.

And obesity isn’t the only concern when it comes to drinking soft drinks. The Framingham Heart Study found that consuming one or more soft drinks daily increased the risk of metabolic syndrome by 45%. Metabolic syndrome is a risk factor for heart attack, stroke and diabetes. Both regular and diet soft drinks showed the same risk. How could drinking a soft drink increase risk? The researchers found a 31% greater risk for obesity, 30% higher risk for added belly fat, 25% greater risk of developing high blood sugar, and 32% higher risk for low HDL levels.

If you find that liquid calories make up a large part of your intake for the day, what healthy changes can you make? Here are a few suggestions:

Gradually decrease your soft drink intake, both regular and diet. If you normally drink a 20 ounce bottle, switch to a 12 ounce can, then to an 8 ounce can, then go to every other day, every few days, then once a week. This gradual decrease is especially helpful if you are drinking