

FDA will re-examine juice guidelines after arsenic study

Apple juice can pose a risk to your health. But not necessarily from the trace amounts of arsenic that people are arguing about.

Despite the government's consideration of new limits on arsenic, nutrition experts say apple juice's real danger is to waistlines and children's teeth. Apple juice has few natural nutrients, lots of calories and, in some cases, more sugar than soda has. It trains a child to like very sweet things, displaces better beverages and foods, and adds to the obesity problem, its critics say.

"It's like sugar water," said Judith Stern, a nutrition professor at the University of California, Davis, who has consulted for candy makers as well as for Weight Watchers. "I won't let my 3-year-old grandson drink apple juice."

Many juices are fortified with vitamins, so they're not just empty calories. But that doesn't appease some nutritionists.

"If it wasn't healthy in the first place, adding vitamins doesn't make it into a health food," and if it causes weight gain, it's not a healthy choice, said Karen Ansel, a registered dietitian in New York and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says

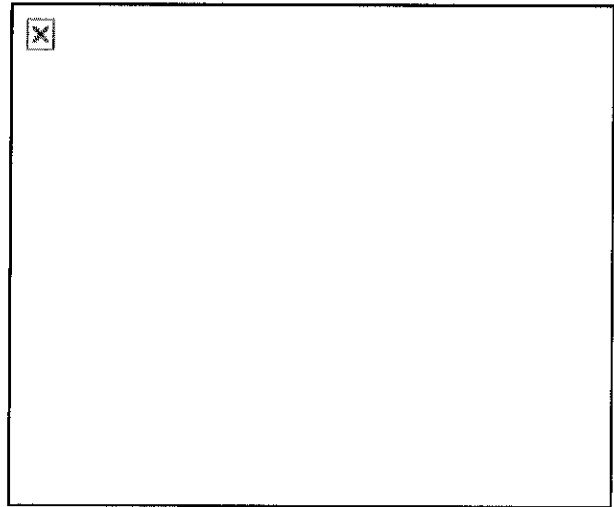
juice can be part of a healthy diet, but its policy is blunt: "Fruit juice offers no nutritional benefit for infants younger than 6 months" and no benefits over whole fruit for older kids.

Children younger than 12 consume 28 percent of all juice and juice drinks, according to the academy. Nationwide, apple juice is second only to orange juice in popularity. Americans slurp 267 ounces of apple juice on average each year, according to the Food Institute's Almanac of Juice Products and the Juice Products Association, a trade group. Lots more is consumed as an ingredient in juice drinks and various foods.

Only 17 percent of the apple juice sold in the United States is produced here. The rest comes from other countries, mostly Argentina, Brazil, Chile and China, the association says.

Television's Dr. Mehmet Oz made that a key point a few months ago when he raised an alarm — some say a false alarm — over arsenic in apple juice, based on tests his show commissioned by a private lab. The

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics

Food and Drug Administration said that its own tests showed that apple juice is safe.

New concerns

On Nov. 30, after Consumer Reports did its own tests on several juice brands and called for stricter standards — as have other consumer groups — the FDA said it would examine whether its restrictions on the amount of arsenic allowed in apple juice are stringent enough.

Arsenic is naturally present in air, food, soil and water in two forms — organic and inorganic. According to the FDA, organic arsenic passes through the body quickly and is essentially harmless. Inorganic arsenic — the type found in pesticides — can be toxic and may pose a cancer risk if consumed at high levels or over a long period.

The FDA uses 23 parts per billion as a guide to judge whether apple juice is contaminated. The agency has the authority to seize apple juice that exceeds those levels, though it has never done so.

Consumer groups say the FDA's level is too high and isn't enforced with enough urgency. Last week's report called for the levels to be as low as 3 parts per billion. The Environmental Protection Agency has set levels for drinking water — it's consumed at much greater quantities than apple juice — at 10 parts per billion.

Schools not worried

Appleton public schools contract food services through a private company, Aramark, and review nutritional guidelines

annually, said Don Hietpas, chief financial officer for the district.

"I think fruit juice is one of those things that's seen as a pretty good product for students, but it needs to be 100 percent fruit juice, not some sort of watered down alternative," Hietpas said. "It's not a large part of the diet, but it is an alternative within the guidelines."

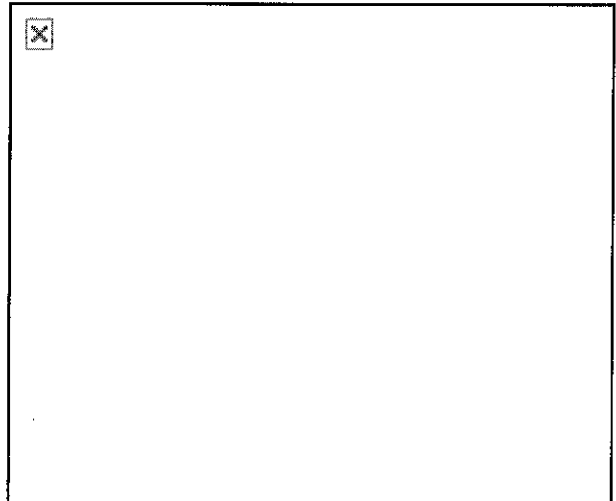
Juice is available to students as a fruit option if students decline fresh fruit, or if they have a milk intolerance or allergy, said Monica Pomasl, food service director for Aramark in Appleton.


Hietpas said the district has confidence in Aramark in contracting with quality food providers.

The district's juice supplier, Ohio-based Country Pure Foods, issued a statement this week in response to Consumer Reports findings.

Although the report found arsenic in juice,

Advertisement



Print Powered By  **FormatDynamics**

the company noted none of the samples exceeded the 23 ppb level of concern for inorganic arsenic.

"Country Pure Foods stands by the position of the Juice Products Association that juice is safe for consumers of all ages," the statement said.

Real fruit better

All juice sold in the United States must be safe and meet U.S. standards, said Pat Faison, technical director for the juice association. As for making good nutrition choices, "a lot of the information that people need about fruit juices is on the label," she said.

So what's on those labels?

Carbohydrates — mostly sugars — in a much higher concentration than in milk. Juice has a small amount of protein and minerals and lacks the fiber in whole fruit, the pediatrics academy notes.

Drinking juice delivers a lot of calories quickly so you don't realize how much you've consumed, whereas you would have to eat a lot of apples to get the same amount, and "you would feel much, much more full from the apples," Ansel said.

"Whole fruits are much better for you," said Dr. Frank Greer, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor and former head of the pediatrics academy's nutrition committee.

He noted that the WIC program — the U.S. Department of Agriculture's nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children — revised its rules in 2005 to replace juice with

baby food fruits and vegetables for children older than 6 months. More than half of all infants born in the United States are eligible for WIC, and the government "really cut back severely on the ability of mothers to get fruit juices" through the program, Greer said.

Already cutting back

The USDA also sets acceptable guidelines for daycare providers around the country.

At Young Child Development Center, 719 West Ridgeview Drive, Appleton, juice already has taken a back seat to milk and water.

"The USDA's federal food program is really trying to push water and fat-free skim milk," said Sarah Bouche, program coordinator for the daycare. "We got a physical nutrition grant from the state last October and reworked our menu."

Now, the provider with 70 children daily serves pineapple juice only once every other week on Mondays with breakfast.

"We didn't really have parents buck that,

Advertisement



what they did (struggle with) was the rule about no sweets," Bouche said. "We only allow healthy treats now for birthdays — no non-foods, no cupcakes."

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics