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ARE YOUR CHILDREN DRINKING TOO MUCH JUICE?

What do you pack when you take your children on a quick trip to the mall, to the grocery store, or to the park? Does it include toys, diapers, snacks, and a sip-cup of juice?

There is something wrong with this picture. Believe it or not, it may be the juice. Health professionals are re-thinking the value of juice in the diets of children ages one to three.

The growing popularity of fruit juice has prompted researchers to examine the effect drinking large amounts of juice has on children. One study revealed that young children who drank more than 12 ounces of juice per day had more problems with obesity and a short stature. It seems children are filling up on juice and not getting the other important nutrients the body needs to grow and develop. In fact even with the increased interest in fruit juice, the consumption of fruits and vegetables has not increased. Seventy-four percent of American children fail to eat 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day. This is the amount recommended to help decrease the risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer.

This is reason for concern. Eating habits are established early in life. Children who don't eat fruits and vegetables become adults who don't eat fruits and vegetables. On the other hand, children who do eat fruits and vegetables grow into healthier adults.

All fruit juice is not nutritionally equivalent. The fruit in the juice impacts the nutrients it contains. Many juices contain little more than sugar and water. Read the label to see what you are getting.

No juice is a substitute for whole fruits and vegetables. Ounce for ounce, juice has more calories than fruit. Juice also lacks fiber. For example, one apple has 81 calories and 4 grams of fiber. An 8-ounce glass of apple juice has 117 calories and no fiber.

This does not mean that juice should be eliminated from the diet of young children. Juice is often the primary source of vitamin C in a child's diet. This vitamin helps in the development of the immune system. Citrus juices such as orange and tangerine are especially rich in vitamin C.

Ultimately, one serving of juice each day is more than enough for a child. Or stretch it into two servings by diluting 2 ounces of juice with 2 ounces of water. The remaining 4 servings of fruits and vegetables should be something other than juice.

This may not be as much as it may seem. The serving size for young children is smaller than for adults. A serving is equivalent to 1 tablespoon for each year of a child's life. For a child 2 years of age, the serving size is 2 tablespoons, or for a 3 year old, the serving size is 3 tablespoons.

All fruits and vegetables are nutritious, however, some have more vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Use this list of “top picks” to guide your selection:

TOP PICKS

VEGETABLES: broccoli, carrots, winter squash, sweet peppers, lima beans, spinach, tomatoes, sweet potatoes

FRUITS: blueberries, apricots, cantaloupe, kiwi, mango, orange, papaya, strawberries, watermelon