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Quenching Summer Thirst Without Sugar

Six Bay Area counties challenge residents to give up soda

By: [Katharine Mieszkowski](#)

Six Bay Area counties want to make this summer less sweet.

The public-education campaign “[Soda Free Summer](#),” a collaboration of Bay Area health departments, encourages children and adults to skip Coke, Gatorade, Snapple and other sugar-sweetened beverages and drink tap water instead.

Alameda County first launched the campaign in the summer of 2007. Contra Costa, San Francisco, Santa Clara, San Mateo and Marin counties are now on all on board. The campaign has spread to the East Coast, with [Boston](#) also urging the public to drink less sugar this summer.

On Tuesday, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors cited health problems and financial costs associated with obesity when it adopted a [resolution](#) decreeing June, July and August a “Soda Free Summer” in the county.

Nearly 60 percent of adults in Contra Costa County are overweight or obese, according to the resolution.

But don't expect to see the beverage aisle at Lucky or Safeway stripped of sugar for three months. The voluntary effort is focused on consumers, not retailers.

The average American consumes almost 100 pounds of sugar per year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Sugary drinks are the largest source of all that sweetness. A 20-ounce plastic bottle of soda contains 17 teaspoons of sugar.

Public health advocates aren't crazy about diet soda either. “Diet soda is not a healthy beverage,” said Darlene Fujii, senior program specialist with the [Alameda County Public Health Department](#). “Diet soda may be an interim step for some people, but it's still sweet, and it's the sweetness that drives us to want more and more of it.”

The alternatives she'd call healthy? Water, unsweetened iced tea and low-fat milk.

Participants in Soda Free Summer pledge to give up sugary beverages and track the number of days that they've been clean.

In California, 24 percent of adults drink at least one soda or other sweetened beverage per day, according to the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. Consumption is more widespread among children: 41 percent of children ages 2 to 11 and 62 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds in the state drink at least one sugared beverage per day.

Adults who drink more than one soda per day are 27 percent more likely to be overweight or obese than those who do not, according to the Center for Health Policy Research.

“It’s the only food or beverage that has a direct link to obesity,” said Julie Greenstein, deputy director of health promotion policy for the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), a health policy advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

But the soda industry calls the campaign overly simplistic.

“One-dimensional programs like ‘Soda-Free Summer’ are no solution to a complex problem like obesity,” said Bob Achermann, the executive director of the California Nevada Soft Drink Association in a statement. “Our industry is doing its part to be part of the solution to obesity.”

Achermann noted that the industry is participating in Michelle Obama's anti-obesity campaign and has established guidelines for the distribution of beverages in schools.

"These are initiatives that are meaningful and will contribute more more to solving the complex problem of obesity than simplistic programs like 'Soda-Free Summer,'" he said.

Even some health advocates who applaud the campaign express doubts about its effectiveness.

“It’s all well and good to say that folks ought to be drinking less sugary drinks, but if they’re not available where they live, then the effectiveness of the campaign is limited,” said Kumar Chandran, nutrition policy advocate at [California Food Policy Advocates](#), a public policy organization focused on the health of low-income Californians.