

THE GUT CONNECTION

DRINK FOR YOUR HEALTH

Functional beverages are defined as 'non-alcoholic drinks that keeps one's body hydrated and provide overall nutritional well-being. These are fortified drinks that prevent or help address health issues across all age groups'.

In recent times, rising levels of overweight and obesity lead to government decisions to subject carbonated beverages to sugar taxes in both Ireland and the UK in 2018. As a result, consumers are now being surrounded by a rise in functional beverages including energy drinks, caffeinated drinks, kombucha and vitamin waters.

Water and milk are probably the healthiest sources of hydration. However, choosing the 'right' beverage can be vital in maintaining our health. In evaluating the healthfulness of a beverage, we need to consider the following factors -calories, ingredients, additives, sugar content, caffeine levels and the effect they can have on our teeth, to name but a few.

So to help you with this decision-making, our dietitians have listed the pros and cons of some of our common beverages below.

Coffee

Coffee is the original functional beverage. Coffee appears to have antioxidant properties which protect your cells against free radicals which cause cell damage and may play a role in prevention of diseases such as heart disease and cancer. Caffeine can also act as a stimulant to the central nervous system, increasing mental alertness. However, a moderate intake (<400mg/day for general population, <200mg/day for pregnant women is recommended by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)) will ensure that your caffeine intake is not to the detriment of you being well rested.

'Sugar-Free' Soft Drinks

With extremely similar tastes as their 'sugary' counterparts, these contain little to no sugar – meaning little to no calories and improved oral health. However beware - despite having no or very little energy content, there is a concern that sugar free soft drinks may trigger a compensatory food intake by stimulating our sweet taste receptors. This may result in overconsumption of other foods, thus contributing to obesity, type 2 diabetes and other obesity-related health problems

Vitamin Waters

These contain added vitamins and minerals. Very few of us are deficient in the nutrients contained within if we follow a balanced diet- and sugar levels may be high. So again be wary of the perceived benefits of these drinks, a glass of water may be just as beneficial.

Juicing

Trends come and go over time, but the latest are the 'Superfood' juices such as 'celery' and 'beetroot' juice. Beetroot for example, is a source of nitrates, which are converted to nitric oxide in the body- a chemical which can help to lower blood pressure as part of a healthy balanced diet. Beetroot juice is also thought to improve exercise performance. While celery and beetroot are components of a balanced diet, juicing, ultimately reduces the fibre content and increases the free sugar content.

Stimulant and Energy Drinks

Usually contain caffeine as a main ingredient, alongside taurine, vitamins and sometimes a combination of other ingredients (such as guarana and ginseng). These drinks are marketed as stimulant drinks for increasing energy. Energy drinks contribute sugar and calories to the diet with little/no nutritional benefit, having sugar levels comparable with other soft drinks. The caffeine content of energy drinks has potential health issues.

Sports Drinks

Isotonic sport drinks can be beneficial for replacing fluids during exercise lasting more than an hour. They can replenish water levels, replaces the electrolytes and glycogen stores lost during exercise. These drinks contain added sugar so limit consumption to hard training sessions and competition. For any exercise activities of less than an hour, water is enough.

Kombucha

Kombucha is a fermented tea (black/green tea, water, sugar and live cultures). It contains probiotics, with known beneficial effects on the gut, however to date very little research has focussed on the specific natural probiotic effects of Kombucha. Our advice: Be warned, the health claims associated with Kombucha do not always hold true to all brands and there are some safety considerations. These products should be avoided by those who are pregnant, breastfeeding or immune-compromised. Why not check out our 'Fermented Food' blog for more information

In Ireland, workplace wellbeing takes place in April! Remember hydration is a key part of maintaining a balanced diet and is important for concentration.

Follow the golden rule - "don't drink your calories." Cut back on, or avoid sweetened drinks. If you drink alcoholic beverages, do so in moderation. Hydrate for lasting energy all day long and throughout the day with water or try sparkling water with a splash of 100% fruit juice.

Experts recommend drinking 6-8 glasses of water a day (1.5-2L). Remember you will need more in a hot climate and during exercise.

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