

## **Sugar content in fruit drinks marketed to kids “unacceptably high”**

*Almost half of products assessed contain entire daily recommended maximum intake*

The sugar content of fruit drinks—including natural fruit juices and smoothies—is “unacceptably high,” with smoothies among the worst offenders, finds research published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.

Almost half the products assessed contained at least a child’s entire daily recommended maximum sugar intake of 19 g or almost five teaspoons, show the findings, which come ahead of the publication of the UK government’s childhood obesity strategy.

Increasing public awareness of the detrimental effect sugar sweetened drinks have on kids’ teeth and waistlines has prompted many parents to opt for seemingly healthier fruit juice and smoothie alternatives.

To assess the sugar content of fruit juice drinks, 100% natural juices, and smoothies marketed specifically to children, the researchers measured the quantity of ‘free’ sugars per 100 ml in 203 standard portion sizes (200 ml) of UK branded and supermarket own label products, using the pack labelling information provided.

‘Free’ sugars refer to sugars, such as glucose, fructose, sucrose, and table sugar, which are added by the manufacturer, and naturally occurring sugars in honey, syrups, fruit juices and fruit juice concentrates, but not the naturally occurring sugars found in whole fruits and vegetables, which the body metabolises differently and which act to curb energy intake.

The results highlighted wide variations in the amount of free sugars between different types of drink and within the same type of product.

The sugar content ranged from 0-16 g/100 ml, with the average 7 g/100 ml. But sugar content was significantly higher in pure fruit juices and smoothies.

Among the 158 fruit juice drinks analysed, the average sugar content was 5.6 g/100 ml, but rose to 10.7/100 ml among the 21 pure fruit juices tested, and to 13 g/100 ml among the 24 smoothies assessed.

Nevertheless, 85 juice drinks, which add up to more than 40% of the total sample of products, contained at least 19 g of free sugars—a child’s entire daily maximum recommended amount.

Almost 60% of all the products would get a red traffic light label—a coding system designed by the UK’s Food Standards Agency to help consumers identify high levels of fat, salt, and sugar in processed food and drink—the researchers point out.

Some 78 products contained non-calorific sweeteners, such as aspartame. Although safe, health experts believe that a reduction in the overall sweetness of products is required for children’s taste buds to become accustomed to less sugar in their diets, say the researchers.

Current dietary guidelines recommend that a serving of fruit juice/drink/smoothie should be no more than 150 ml, but only six of the products assessed matched this portion size.

Furthermore, the labels on all the products contained a reference intake, which is in line with European law. But this figure applies to an average sized adult woman who does an average amount of physical activity, so wholly inappropriate for children, the researchers emphasise.

They acknowledge that only products available in supermarkets were assessed, that new products constantly appear that may have lower sugar content, and that squashes and cordials were excluded because these are diluted to taste, making portion size comparison difficult.

But based on their findings, they make several recommendations:

- Fruit juices/juice drinks/smoothies with a high free sugar content should not count as one of the UK government's '5 a day' recommendations, as is currently the case
- Fruit should preferably be eaten whole, not as juice
- Parents should dilute fruit juice with water or opt for unsweetened juices, and only allow these drinks during meals
- Portion sizes should be limited to 150 ml/day
- Manufacturers should stop adding unnecessary amounts of sugars, and therefore calories, to their fruit drink/juice/smoothie products—and if they can't do this voluntarily, the government should step in with statutory regulations