

Pop Culture

What's all the fizz?

by MADELEINE GREY

A row of soft drinks stands seductively on my desk, calling out to my children like sugary sirens: Snapple! Mountain Dew! Vanilla Coke! Orange Crush! It's research to me, but to my kids these beverages are a humongous magnet, pulling them closer with bright neon colours, see-through packaging, chubby bottles, cool drinking spouts and action-packed graphics.

"Can I have one?" they plead.

"Do you know what's really in them?" I counter.

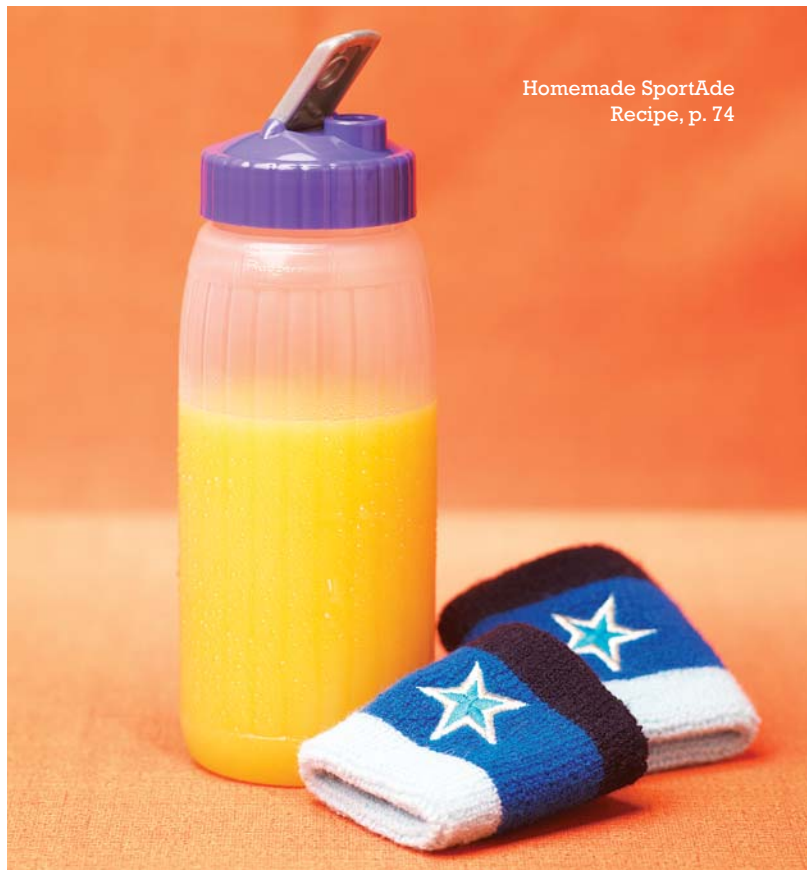
They give me a "you are crazy" look, but co-operate in hopes of a random gulp or two. The fine print on a can of root beer reveals nine ingredients with "carbonated water" followed by "sugar and/or glucose-fructose" at the top.

"Glucose-fructose is actually sugar," I explain. "It's kind of like a code word."

Spurred on, my young detectives scour all 11 labels on my desk and, boy, do they find sugar. In fact, all 11 cans or bottles on my desk list carbonated water (or water) first, followed by sugar and/or glucose-fructose. Thanks to previous family time reading food labels, they know ingredients are listed by weight, in descending order. So that means there's more water and sugar than anything else in these drinks. In fact, a 12 oz can of pop has from 9 to 12 tsp of sugar. But pop isn't the only sugary concoction calling out to our children.

"Soft drinks," says Rose Soneff, community nutritionist with Interior Health in BC, "are just one among many drinks loaded with sugar."

Whether it's Biba or Brisk, SoBe or Coke, the line between "pop" and "sweetened drinks" is as fuzzy as the fizz in a carbonated drink. Especially



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now, with the power of branding, products like Sunny Delite or Kool-Aid Jammers enter childhood consciousness, land in cupboards and are doled out by busy parents uncertain of their nutritional status.

So here's a little clarity amid the bubbles and syrup. By definition, soft drinks are carbonated, which means that carbon dioxide has been pumped into the water under pressure. Soft drinks also contain phosphoric acid to give them sharper flavour. They might have caffeine (more on that later) and they often come in diet forms, with artificial sweeteners (more on that too).

Un-soft drinks include iced teas, sports drinks and fruit beverages. They all have one major ingredient in common: sugar. Iced teas and fruit drinks are close behind pop's sugar content with 3 to 11 tsp per serving. A pouch of Kool-Aid Grape Jammers doesn't look quite the same in your kid's hand when you consider it has 6 tsp of sugar, which on an ounce by ounce basis, is just about on par with a can of Coke.

Beverage advertisers and packagers like to spin a little sugary magic. They are eager to print claims like "no caffeine," "real juice," "daily supply of

vitamin C” or “with electrolytes” on their labels, but, for obvious reasons, aren’t rushing to spell out the amount of added sugar. But it’s easy to figure out (especially in 2006, when new nutritional labelling comes into effect). Just take the number of grams listed under carbohydrates and divide by four. For example, a can of Mountain Dew has 46 g carbohydrates, equalling over 11 tsp sugar. Gulp.

If that number alarms you, consider these. According to Cadbury Schweppes, “If all the Snapple bottles consumed in a single year were laid end to end, they would circle the earth four times.” So it’s no wonder that Refreshments Canada (a national trade association representing manufacturers of most non-alcoholic beverages) reports that our consumption of carbonated beverages has almost doubled in the last 30 years, with the average Canadian knocking back 111 L a year.

Kids are helping to boost those numbers. BC Interior Health says consumption by youth aged 6 to 17 has doubled since 1977 from 5 to 12 fluid ounces per day, and that most Canadian children are drinking more pop than milk.

This change in drinking habits has health officials and some politicians alarmed. Last September, Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty pulled soft-drink vending machines out of all public elementary schools — a move Soneff would like to see extended to Canadian junior high and high schools.

Soneff warns that if kids’ consumption rates of sweetened beverages continue to climb, we can expect to see growing rates of childhood obesity, huge costs to our health system (due to type 2 diabetes and other diseases linked with obesity) and “sky-high rates of osteoporosis in younger and younger women” because of all the calcium being displaced by sugary liquids.

It’s not just the sugar in pop that concerns Soneff, but caffeine too. In Canada, caffeine cannot be added to clear pops and juices, only cola, and

Homemade SportAde

Here’s a simple recipe recommended by sports nutritionists to keep your child well hydrated during physical activity. Pack it in a Thermos or small cooler for the next soccer, baseball or basketball meet.

2 cups (500 mL)	pure fruit juice
2 cups (500 mL)	water
¼ tsp (1 mL)	salt

Combine all ingredients and serve.
Makes 4 cups (1 L).

The Dish on Portions

calories	55	calcium	1%*
protein	1 g	iron	1%*
fat	0.3 g	vitamin A	1%*
carbs	12.5 g	vitamin C	68%*

**of recommended daily amount*

Our recipe tester, Adell Shneer, tests our Nutrition column using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing slight variations in the result.

it has to be on the ingredients list. According to the *University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine News*, “to a child, a can of caffeinated cola is equal to four cups of coffee to an adult.”

Plus, there’s a caffeine catch. While caffeine must be listed, the amount need not be. A 355 mL can of cola has 36 to 46 mg, but diet colas pack more: Diet Coke has 42 mg and Pepsi One has 55 mg. Meanwhile, so-called energy drinks like Bawls, Guru and Speedster Fruit Punch (marketed to teens and young adults) have 80 mg, 125 mg and 169 mg respectively, but do not include caffeine on the label or ingredients list. Instead, these drinks contain guarana, a bean from South America with two to three times the concentration of caffeine found in coffee. While the amount of caffeine added to colas is regulated as a food additive by Health Canada,

guarana slips under the regulation radar because it is a naturally occurring flavouring or ingredient. Yes, guarana must be on the ingredients list, but most people don’t know it is full of caffeine.

Energy drinks cost about twice as much as pop, and are not likely to be tops among the 6- to 12-year-old set, but sports drinks are. Sports drinks do have sugar — about 9 tsp in a 600 mL bottle — but that’s about half the amount found in fruit juices or soft drinks.

According to Toronto sports nutritionist Susie Langley, a well-designed sports drink has the right amount of carbohydrates to “prevent a child’s blood sugar from dropping and keep their energy up. It’s important for young athletes and active kids to drink enough fluid, and research has shown that they will drink more fluids if they like the flavour.” And we know most kids are more likely to go for something sweet rather than plain water.

Re-enter pop, where the fizz gets only murkier when discussing artificial sweeteners. Health Canada has approved the use of aspartame, acesulfame, saccharin and sucralose, but the Centre for Science in the Public Interest says that acesulfame and saccharin should be avoided due to lack of testing, and aspartame is probably safe but should be avoided by people with the rare disorder phenylketonuria (PKU). Sucralose gets their green light.

What’s the parent of a thirsty child to do? Soneff recommends a single glass of milk at every meal and limiting pure 100% juice to ½ to 1 cup a day for children. The rest of the time, turn to water. Keeping a jug of water in the fridge or investing in a home water cooler encourages H₂O consumption. On special occasions, fill a glass with half juice, half carbonated water and drop in a swizzle stick, for kid-happy pizzazz. And don’t forget to say “Cheers!” ♥

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On April 5, you can ask Madeleine Greey your nutrition questions in her monthly food forum at Todayparent.com/forums.