



Healthy Drinks for Children and Students

By Lauren Djakovac

As most of you would be aware, the Right Bite program is a healthy eating strategy for schools developed by the State Government in partnership with SA Health. Its guidelines have been mandatory in all South Australian Government schools since January 2008.

The program uses a “traffic light” system to categorise foods according to their nutritional profile, helping to determine which foods and drinks are the healthiest choices. ‘Green’ category foods are the healthiest choices and should always be encouraged and promoted. The ‘Amber’ section contains more processed foods, with some added salt, sugar and/or fat. The ‘Red’ category includes highly processed, energy dense and nutrient poor foods which are no longer sold in school canteens and vending machines.

With increasing concerns about the harmful effects of caffeine and ‘energy’ drinks, Right Bite has produced updated information on the healthiest drink choices for children and students. Based on the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating and Australian Dietary Guidelines, it is part of the ongoing educative approach to improving the health and wellbeing of children.

Information from Right Bite Fact Sheet No. 3:

Drinks for good health

The healthiest drink of choice is water, with nothing added to it. Plain water is the best way to rehydrate the body, the cheapest and kilojoule free. Calcium in the diet is essential for developing healthy bones in children. Research shows many young people are not consuming enough calcium, therefore dairy drinks are recommended as a healthy choice, particularly reduced or low fat milk.

Fruit juice

Fresh fruit should be eaten in preference to drinking fruit juice as fresh fruit is higher in nutritional value. Under labelling law, a drink sold as ‘fruit juice’ must contain 96% or more fruit content. Whereas a drink sold as ‘fruit juice drink’ can be anywhere from only 5% fruit based and usually contains added sugar. Right Bite criteria specify that fruit juice sold in schools must be 99% or more fruit juice.

Caffeine drinks

Drinks containing caffeine, such as soft drinks and iced coffee are a part of the ‘Red’ category. Caffeine is not recommended for children and can be addictive and cause anxiety and irritability. Adverse effects of caffeine can include: nervousness, headache, rapid heart rate and high blood pressure. Caffeinated drinks may lead to reduced learning ability in the school setting and reduced feeling of general wellbeing.

‘Energy’ drinks

These drinks contain high levels of caffeine which, as mentioned above, can have harmful effects on the health of students. ‘Energy’ drinks also contain very high levels of sugar, are low in nutritional value and high in kilojoules. In the school setting, these drinks may lead to problems with concentration and lead have a negative impact on learning ability.

‘Sports’ drinks

Generally, ‘sports’ drinks are not necessary for junior and school sporting activities. Flavored and carbonated waters such as these can contain sugar and kilojoules. The best drink for hydration during school sporting activities is plain water. ■