

Lifestyle

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Drink to your health?

Nutrient-packed water may tout health benefits but dietitians advise drinking it in moderation

By Yip Wai Yee



Each 500ml bottle of Glaceau Vitaminwater contains about 22g of sugar and 95 calories. -- ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Glaceau Vitaminwater, the name of the colourful bottles of vitamin-infused water drinks, sounds like a nutrient-packed and healthy beverage.

Launched in Singapore last November, these mildly sweet drinks, which belong to the Coca-Cola Company, are said to be infused with vitamins such as vitamin C, B3 and B12.

And having already gained a loyal following in the United States among svelte celebrities such as socialite Paris Hilton, country pop star Carrie Underwood and actress Liv Tyler, Vitaminwater is as trendy as it is healthy.

But dietitians and nutritionists alike are warning consumers here not to get too excited just yet.

While each bottle may indeed include some added vitamins, they are, however, also filled with sugar and calories. Available in six different flavours here, each 500ml bottle contains 22.5g of sugar and 95 calories.

A regular soft drink has about twice the amount of sugar and calories - around 55g of sugar and 200 calories for the same bottle size. But nutritionists warn consumers that they still need to be mindful of their intake.

Ms Ashu Sharma, nutritionist and full-time member of the Singapore Nutrition And Dietetics Association, says: 'The stated vitamins cannot undo the sugar added to the drinks nor the harm caused by the consumption of such sugary drinks.

'A high-sugar diet not only leads to weight-related issues but also increases the risk factor for obesity, cardiovascular diseases, cancer and dental cavities manifold.'

Other food experts such as clinical dietitian Jaclyn Reutens say the name Vitaminwater is potentially misleading.

There are other nutrient-infused water drinks in the market but none of them has such an overtly 'healthy'-sounding name.

In Singapore, these include Yeo's Pink Dolphin series, whose peach flavour has vitamins C, B6 and B12, and its white grape flavour includes amino acids.

Miss Reutens says of Vitaminwater: 'The name of the beverage must have been developed to be taken literally because it literally contains vitamins and water. However, it also contains sugar in the form of fructose and sucrose, which are actually the main ingredients after water.'

'To represent this beverage accurately, it should have been labelled 'Sugared Vitaminwater' instead.'

And it looks like Ms Reutens is not alone in her concern over Vitaminwater's arguably deceptive marketing strategy.

In the US, Vitaminwater is currently facing an ongoing legal battle over this issue.

In early 2009, the Center For Science In The Public Interest (CSPI), a food-health advocacy group based in Washington D.C., sued Coca-Cola for purporting 'deceptive and unsubstantiated claims over the company's 'Vitaminwater' line of drinks'.

CSPI argued that Vitaminwater was violating consumer-protection laws by making health claims on what is essentially still junk food, simply because the drink also includes some added nutrients.

Mr Stephen Gardner, one of the chief litigators for CSPI, was quoted in a Time magazine article, saying: 'They added vitamins to crap, and it's still crap. Consumers shouldn't have to assume that the front of a label is a lie.'

Every Vitaminwater bottle, apart from informing its consumers of the flavour itself, such as 'dragonfruit' or 'lemonade', also comes with specific booster-sounding names such as 'restore' and 'ignite'. The US lawsuit is still ongoing.

So, what is the bottomline about Vitaminwater consumption? Basically, drink in moderation and get your major dose of vitamins from a balanced diet instead.

Ms Alefia Vasanwala, senior dietitian at Mount Elizabeth Hospital, says: 'The different flavours of Vitaminwater contain different types of vitamins and yet no one single flavour has all the vitamins needed to remain healthy. Hence, it cannot be taken as the sole source for all the vitamins.'

'A balanced diet, which includes all the food groups in recommended servings, is still the best way of obtaining all the different vitamins needed to stay healthy.'

In fact, this is the line that Coca-Cola Singapore takes. Mr James Chi, brand manager for Vitaminwater in Singapore, says: 'Glaceau Vitaminwater is not a substitute for a balanced diet nor vitamin supplements. It is not a replacement for fresh fruit and vegetables, although it will keep you hydrated and each variant contains a different combination of vitamins.'

'We recommend that people consume Vitaminwater as part of a healthy, balanced diet and active lifestyle.'

Still, nutritionists say good old, plain water is best.

Ms Vasanwala says: 'Plain water helps us to regulate our body temperature, flush waste products from our body, prevent dehydration and dissolve nutrients and minerals to make it accessible to the body. All that and with zero calories, too.'

Nonetheless, when plain water does become a little too bland at times, choosing to drink Vitaminwater is still better than going with most other sweetened drinks available in the market, such as carbonated sodas.

Ms Sharma explains: 'Most other commercial drinks are just a mixture of sugar and water and provide no nutrition at all except for 'empty calories'. At least Vitaminwater has some nutritive benefits, even if it also includes sugar.'

ITE Bishan student Clarissa Tng, 19, who drinks at least one bottle of Vitaminwater every day, says: 'I like how the drink is not as sickly sweet as most other drinks. It is very refreshing and I do believe in all the stated vitamins on the label too.'

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