

Critics say diet drink labels are forum for false advertising

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Stephen Voltz (left) and Fritz Grobe create a geyser effect from a combination of diet soda and Mentos mints. Photo: AP Photo/Diane Bondareff

WASHINGTON — Recent research suggests that diet soft drinks may actually cause weight gain. Now, a new group is charging Coca-Cola and PepsiCo with false advertising.

The California-based group is known as Right to Know. It is calling on the government to stop the companies from labeling their drinks with the word “diet.”

Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi are “advertised to make us think they assist in weight loss,” the group said. “In fact ample scientific evidence suggests that this is not true, and the opposite may well be true.”

Soda Makers Disagree With Claims

The American Beverage Association represents soda makers. It strongly denied Right to Know's claims. It said numerous studies show that diet sodas are very helpful as part of an overall weight-loss plan.

Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and other soda and food makers use artificial sweeteners instead of natural sugars. They claim the sweeteners are not fattening, even though they taste sugary. Switching to sodas containing artificial sweeteners can help people lose weight, they say.

Aspartame is the most popular sugar substitute. It is used in more than 5,000 products.

Both Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi contain aspartame. The artificial sweetener has been mainly sold under the brand name NutraSweet and is consumed worldwide.

Several Studies Show Diet Drinks Don't Help People Lose Weight

A number of recent studies have challenged the belief that artificial sweeteners help with weight loss. One example is a two-year study of 164 children. It found that overweight kids drank more diet sodas than normal-weight children.

Another nationwide study looked at more than 10,000 children ages 9 to 14. It found that drinking diet soda caused weight gains among boys.

However, not all scientists are convinced. In particular, they challenge the idea that the sweeteners cause weight gain. Dr. James O. Hill is one of the scientists who do not agree. He has conducted his own study of artificial sweeteners.

"I am absolutely convinced that there's no way they are causing weight gain," Hill said. Drinking diet sodas is "not something people should worry about," he added.

Government Agency Fights False Advertising

Hill's own study found that people who drank diet soda lost more weight than those who drank water. Hill admitted he had gotten hundreds of thousands of dollars from the American Beverage Association to pay for the study. However, he said the Association had not tried to influence his research findings.

Right to Know admits that not all research studies agree. However, it said that studies paid for by soda makers are "less trustworthy" than those paid for independently.

The Food and Drug Administration is the government agency that is in charge of food labeling. The Trade Commission watches over advertising claims. Neither would comment on Right to Know's charge against the soda companies.

However, Trade Commission spokesman Peter Kaplan said the agency is always on the lookout for false advertising. The agency is particularly concerned with false health claims, Kaplan added.