

Gout linked to sucrose in sugary drinks

We know that regularly consuming drinks sweetened with a processed sugar called high-fructose corn syrup can lead to gout. Now a study has linked gout with drinks containing another common sugar, called sucrose.

INTRODUCTION

‘Sugar’ can be a fairly loose term, covering several distinct types of this common sweetener. For most people, the differences don’t matter too much. But for some people the type of sugar they consume is important – for example, if they’re lactose intolerant (lactose is the sugar that’s found in milk).

It might also be an important distinction for people with gout. Several studies have found that regularly consuming drinks sweetened with a sugar called high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) can lead to gout.

But when research gets reported and re-reported in the media, important details can get lost, and HFCS can just become ‘sugar’. With a complex condition such as gout it’s important to be clear about what might cause problems.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS HOPE TO FIND?

This study looked specifically at sucrose – what most people would think of as table sugar. Before HFCS became a cheaper (and arguably sweeter) alternative for food producers, sucrose was the most common type of sugar used to sweeten foods and drinks. In this study the researchers wanted to find out whether gout was more common in people who regularly consumed drinks sweetened with sucrose.

WHO WAS STUDIED?

This study was done in New Zealand. It included white New Zealanders of European descent as well as Maori people and Pacific Island people. This gave the researchers the chance to study whether sucrose-sweetened drinks had different effects in people of different ethnic backgrounds.

HOW WAS THE STUDY CONDUCTED?

The researchers recruited some people with gout from rheumatology clinics and community centres in New Zealand. They also recruited people who didn’t have gout, as a comparison group.

To give the study more weight the researchers also looked at information on people who had taken part in another study on the risk of cardiovascular disease. (Enlarging studies in this way is quite a common research method.)

The people in both parts of the study answered questions about their lifestyle, including how many sucrose-sweetened drinks they generally consumed. In total the researchers looked at about 8,700 people.

WHAT DOES THE NEW STUDY SAY?

People who consumed a lot of sucrose-sweetened drinks were more likely to have gout than those who consumed none.

People of white European origin who consumed four of these drinks a day were more than six times more likely to have gout than those who drank none of them.

Interestingly, the link between sucrose-sweetened drinks and gout wasn’t as strong in the other ethnic groups. Maori people who consumed four sucrose-sweetened drinks a day were about five times more likely to have gout than those who drank none. And Pacific Island people who consumed four of these drinks daily were two to three times more likely to have the condition.

HOW RELIABLE ARE THE FINDINGS?

The researchers did their best to adjust their figures for other factors that can be linked to gout, including people’s age, weight, and sex, whether they had kidney disease or high blood pressure, and how much alcohol they drank.

But they didn’t have all the information on people’s diets that they needed to rule out other links. For example, the researchers think it’s possible that people who consume a lot of sugary drinks may be more likely to have a comparatively poor general diet. So it’s possible that the higher chance of having gout was down to more than just what they drank.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME?

At this stage this research doesn't prove that drinks sweetened with sucrose cause gout – just that people who drink them seem more likely to have the condition. It's a subtle distinction, but researchers have to be cautious when interpreting their results.

The link does appear to be strong, though. And, whether avoiding these drinks can help prevent gout or perhaps reduce the severity of the symptoms, it's one of many good reasons to stick to water when you're thirsty.

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