

The hidden dangers in soft drinks

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Unwelcome additive: Glycerol, which is used as a sweetener in slushies and other ultra-processed products, can cause headaches, dizziness and diarrhoea – as well as more serious side effects in younger children.

Should they all be banned? Parents and researchers are calling for action after a study recorded a series of hospitalisations of children who consumed slushies. But some say the problem runs far deeper.

What's happening?

Millions of people around the world love them, but this week, a study in Ireland found that, over the past six years, 21 children in the UK and Ireland were admitted unconscious to A&E after consuming frozen slushies.

This is because of glycerol intoxication syndrome, which comes from glycerol, a sugar replacement in slushies which can cause headaches, nausea, low blood sugar and unconsciousness.

Concerned researchers have called for a ban on selling these icy drinks to children under the age of eight. But slushies are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to dangerous drinks.

Find out more

Ultra-processed foods (UPF), a category which includes fizzy drinks, have been linked by recent reviews to as many as 32 harmful health effects,

including heart disease, cancer, type 2 diabetes, poor mental health and early death.

UPFs are made using industrial methods and unnatural ingredients. Science suggests that they lack nutrients and can cause weight gain.

Researchers have called for a change. Many feel that we are endangering our young people by allowing them unlimited access to toxic drinks without helping them to understand the health risks.

Should they all be banned?

Some say

Yes! From slushies to energy drinks and ready meals, across the world people are consuming toxic substances that have negative health effects we do not fully understand.

Others think

No! We should be allowed to make decisions for ourselves in a free society.

Some people say

"If we could have but one generation of properly born, trained, educated, and healthy children, a thousand other problems of government would vanish."

Herbert Hoover (1874 – 1964), 31st president of the United States

What do you think?

Six steps to discovery

1. Connect

How do you feel about this story? - Do you like sugary drinks? Do you ever get worried about the health implications of drinking them?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: Why does glycerol affect some children but not all? What is the most unhealthy drink and why?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Pick out one thing we know for certain about this story and one thing we cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - Imagine that you are part of a government advisory group trying to figure out how to get people to eat fewer ultra-processed foods. What ideas would you recommend?

5. Express

What do others believe? - In small groups, imagine that you are a company which has created a new healthy alternative to fizzy drinks for children. Now, you are coming up with a marketing strategy to get young people to consume your healthy drinks. Design a marketing plan, for example a poster, aimed at people in your age group.

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - It is 2050, and a new, highly addictive fizzy drink has been designed which contains three times the daily recommended amount of sugar and appears to be controlling people's brains. Write a short story about the drink and how you managed to resist drinking it.