

Sugary Drink Terminology

Empty calories

“Empty calories” refer to calories from saturated fat and added sugars, which provide no necessary nutrients. Foods that are high in empty calories, such as sugary drinks should be limited.. Visit USDA’s MyPlate (<http://choosemyplate.gov/weight-management-calories/calories/empty-calories.html>) to learn more.

Calorie-dense foods

“Calorie dense” refers to a food or beverage that has a high number of calories with relatively few nutrients. If a food is high in calories as well as high in nutrients it would not be considered calorie dense. Examples of calorie-dense foods are soda, candy, and desserts. While these foods may contain some nutrients, the amount of calories for the volume is considered disproportionate to the amount of nutrients it contains. In general, people should avoid consuming calorie-dense foods and beverages, but if they are consumed they should be enjoyed infrequently and in small quantities.

Nutrient-dense foods

“Nutrient dense” refers to foods that contain high levels of nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, or protein, but with relatively few calories. These are high-quality, healthy foods that have generally undergone minimal processing. Examples of nutrient-dense foods are most fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lean meats. An example of a nutrient-dense beverage is plain low-fat milk. Balanced diets should be high in nutrient-dense foods.

Zero-calorie sweeteners (also known as artificial sweeteners, nonnutritive sweeteners or sugar substitutes)

These names refer to nonnutritive sweeteners, meaning sweeteners that do not contribute calories. Sugar substitutes are considered any sweetener used in place of table sugar (sucrose). These substances are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. Some popular zero-calorie sweeteners include Aspartame, Saccharin, and Sucralose. Some sugar substitutes, such as Stevia, are referred to as “natural” and are structurally different than artificial sweeteners; however, they are also highly processed. While beverages containing zero-calorie sweeteners are often marketed as healthy alternatives to sugary drinks, studies have not conclusively shown that these drinks are appropriate for children.