OUR KIDS ARE SWEET ENOUGH

My last column provided some fun ideas for getting the kids into the kitchen and learn to cook real food. For this column I strive to get grown-ups to support healthier beverage options. Many of these grown-ups are decision makers of facilities where children spend their time during the summer. This includes parents who determine what is bought and brought into the household.

I realize this is a hard act to follow. Sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) are available everywhere. One can hardly go into a public building that doesn’t have a vending machine, including where I presently sit to compose this article.

Why the focus on sugary beverages?

- One in three Maryland children is classified as overweight or obese, ranking Maryland as 16th in overall prevalence of childhood obesity in the U.S.
- The research linking sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) to obesity and other negative health outcomes is stronger than for any other single category of beverages or food.
- For children aged 2-18 years old, SSBs are not only the largest source of added sugar, but the largest single source of calories.

One group is on a mission to change things......the newly formed state Coalition, Sugar Free KIDS Maryland, launched in February, 2014. The group, a collaboration between MedChi, the American Heart Association, the NAACP and the Horizon Foundation, is focused on enacting evidence-based policies to reverse these critical public health problems. According to Executive Director Robi M. Rawl, “This generation of children is the first that may live shorter lives than their parents, reversing a trend that is as old as civilization. One soda a day increases a child’s likelihood of being overweight by 55% and an adults by 27%. Drinking one to two sweetened beverages a day increases diabetes risk by 26%.”

Upon talking to Ms. Rawl, who is passionate about this cause, I asked her, so what should parents offer their child to drink? She directed me to a wonderful web resource – The Better Beverage Finder found at http://www.betterbeveragefinder.org/
You can search for drink options based on:

- Type of beverage – bottled water, sparkling drinks, flavored/vitamin water, teas/coffees, juice, soda, dairy, dairy alternatives, energy drinks, and sports drinks.
- Type of sweetener – none, natural, artificial and hybrid
- Caffeine

I was especially thrilled to see caffeine listed which is not required by law to be listed on the nutrition facts label. As a result many children are consuming caffeinated drinks without even being aware of it.

The site provides other useful resources – posters, handouts, recipes, and videos - all with the goals of changing awareness about drink options. Our kids are sweet enough……so join the movement to ditch the sugar!

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