

Bay Area nutritionists take aim at sugar-filled sodas

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SAN FRANCISCO - Inside a meeting room in a government building basement, it sounded like preparations for battle were under way on Monday.

But instead of generals plotting the overthrow of a despot, about 20 nutritionists from San Mateo and Santa Clara counties were strategizing on ways to launch a Bay Area-wide "Soda Free Summer" in 2008. In nearby rooms, dozens of their colleagues from Contra Costa, Alameda, San Francisco and Marin counties were doing the same.

"It would be known as the 'Summer of the Soda Wars,' " one nutritionist from Santa Clara County exclaimed, during a boisterous brainstorming session on the initiative.

The sugary drink, along with its close cousins - sweetened ice teas and sports drinks - is increasingly in the cross-hairs of nutritionists, who blame sugar-saturated beverages a key cause of the nation's growing girth, in particular among youth. The Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley states that sugared beverage consumption has increased 500 percent over the past five decades - at a rate that roughly corresponds with the increase in overweight children.

The strategy sessions followed the announcement by the director of Nutrition Services for Alameda County, Diane Woloshin, of the results of that county's "Soda Free Summer" campaign this year. Woloshin said that 43 percent of a statistically significant sampling of 4,000 participants reported that they either reduced or abandoned soda consumption for 10 weeks between June and August.

"We thought that was a fabulous result," Woloshin said. "If we can do it in one county, we hope we can do it in others."

Woloshin on Monday was addressing an audience at a meeting of the Bay Area Nutrition and Physical Activity Collaborative, held in the state building in San Francisco. A number of Bay Area public and private organizations form the collaborative, which promotes sound nutrition and physical activity, particularly in low-income communities. Woloshin also serves on the leadership council for the collaborative.

The "Soda Free Summer" initiative was Alameda County's first effort to organize a countywide effort to persuade residents to drink water, unsweetened ice tea, non-fat milk and an occasional glass of juice, instead of drinks loaded with sugar. The 10-week program was funded by a \$50,000 grant from Kaiser Permanente.

Woloshin described how she and others organized a confederation of about 70 organizations, such as parks and recreation departments, food banks and summer camps, to distribute more than 60,000 brochures to residents on the initiative. Some churches in Alameda County also joined the effort by promoting "Soda Free Sundays."

The brochure listed facts meant to astonish: Soda is the No. 1 source of sugar in the American diet; drinking one 20-ounce bottle of soda daily for a year can lead to a 25-pound weight gain; and the average teen drinks 750 cans of soda yearly.

"I think people are really shocked at how much sugar is in a soda," Woloshin said, noting that a 20-ounce bottle contains 17 teaspoons, along with 240 calories. The beverage, nutritionists say, also does little to satiate appetites.

Representatives from the American Beverage Association, an industry group, weren't available Monday afternoon for comment on the "Soda Free Summer" initiative. In the past, however, the group has emphasized the role of sedentary lifestyles as a key culprit behind the high rates of excess weight among Americans.

The brochure also provided a 10-week log for monitoring soda consumption, and a tear-off prepaid postcard asking people to state their commitment to joining the "Soda Free Summer" campaign. More than 4,000 people responded.

In San Mateo, Santa Clara and Contra Costa counties, the nutritionists expressed near certainty that in 2008, their counties will launch "Soda Free Summer" programs.

"I would say there's a 99 percent chance we'll be part of this," said Eliana Schultz, director of Public Health Nutrition Services for the San Mateo County Health Department. She said that her department would explore teaming with the county's Prevention of Childhood Obesity Task Force to organize the effort.

Janet Leader, a nutritionist with the Santa Clara County Public Health Department, gave the same odds for Santa Clara County launching a "Soda Free Summer" in 2008.

Donna Coit, senior health educator with Contra Costa Health Services, said, "It's very likely we will as well. It's got great potential."

Schultz, however, was careful to not describe the growing Bay Area movement as a campaign to vilify soda and other sugary drinks.

"Being disparaging about a kind of food is not where we want to come from," she said. "I think the food industry, in terms of advertising budget, just has much more clout (than county public health agencies).

"We're just trying to level the playing field," Schultz said. "I see it as raising awareness of the choices people are making."