Ursula Arens
Writer; Nutrition & Dietetics

Ursula has spent most of her career in industry as a company nutritionist for a food retailer and a pharmaceutical company. She was also a nutrition scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation for seven years.

HARD FACTS ON SOFT DRINKS

What we drink now seems as much discussed as what we eat. Dietary surveys report food and drink diary data from population sub-groups, and these are chopped and sliced to provide great volumes of information on population nutrient intakes and trends.

The latest UK National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) published in September 2016 reports that sugars intakes as a percentage of energy are unchanged in all age groups bar children aged four to 10 years: for this group there were significantly lower intakes, partly attributable to a decline in sugar-sweetened soft drinks. Intakes in children are currently 100g per day, down from 130g per day reported five years previously.

Also of great use for diet detectives is data collected by market research organisations and trade associations. The best place to find most recent national data on soft drinks is the 2016 annual report of the British Soft Drink Association (BSDA). The leading statistic promoted within the report, is that sugar intake from all soft drinks consumption is down by 16% from 2012. But are we (UK public) drinking less soft drinks? Or differently? Or is product reformulation the theme?

Annual per capita intakes of all types of soft drinks in the five-year period between 2010 and 2015 are slightly down, from 211 to 204 litres. In contrast, the amount spent per capita is up, from £190 to £215. So, we are drinking seven litres less per annum and/but it is costing us £25 more.

The biggest sector, and nearly 40% of total sales, is anything sweet tasting and sparkling. In the five-year span ending 2015, we were drinking less fizzy drinks, but spending more on them. More than half of the 77 litres we consume annually is cola, with small trails of lemonade, tonics and other flavours. The ratio of regular calorie versus lower calorie products is about half-half. Bottled waters are a growth area, with annual intakes of nearly 40 litres, but in contrast to the sweet carbonates, most people (two thirds) preferred their water to be still.

Fruit juice means only products with 100% fruit content. This can be chilled or ambient, as juices or smoothies, or freshly squeezed versus from concentrate. Juices are 7% of soft drinks consumed and, predictably, orange dominates over two thirds of sales. Apple limps in at just under 15% of juice sales and other single fruit juices cannot squeeze past the 5% hurdle. Juice intakes are significantly down in the five-year period to 2015, from just over 19 litres to just under 15 litres. Uniquely in the drinks sector, consumers are both drinking less and spending less on fruit juice. Perhaps the juice sector is adversely affected, because it is the one category of sweet drinks that does not have the option to exchange sugars fully, or partly, for intense sweeteners. And fruit juices are the only sector that can support claims of naturally containing useful amounts of certain vitamins and plant pigments with possible health benefits.

The more specialist soft drinks sectors show opposite trends. Sports drinks are now less than 1% of drinks sales and volumes purchased over the previous five years are in decline. In contrast, the bizarre category of energy drinks is now worth two billion pounds per annum: they now claim more than 5% of drinks sales and volumes purchased are in steep growth. Unsurprisingly, most products in this sector are described as regular calorie; the small minority of energy drinks described as 'low energy' confuse consumers and themselves, as of course the terms are contradictory. But some of the growth of the energy drinks sector does seem to be from

Soft drink industry terms

No calorie:
0 kcals / 100ml

Low calorie:
< 20 kcals / 100ml

Mid calorie:
21-30 kcals / 100ml

Regular calorie:
> 30kcals / 100ml

Table 1: Drinks on display at the food-to-go trade show, Lunch!

- **Barracudos:** natural sugar-free energy with added proteins and vitamins
- **Buddha Water:** organic birch sap water
- **Get More Vitamin Drinks:** sugar-free vitamin drinks
- **GoBirch Water:** tree water with naturally occurring amino acids and minerals
- **Huskara:** soft drink made with outer layer of the coffee cherry
- **Karma Cola:** fair trade organic cola
- **Impact Health Tonics:** nutrient boost health tonics
- **MOJU:** cold pressed booster shots
- **Rejuvenation Water:** amino acid enriched spring water
- **Roots Collective:** vegetable blends drinks
- **Simplee Aloe with Superberries:** detoxing aloe with antioxidant berries
- **Tao Pure Infusion:** pure tea, flower and fruit infusions
- **ZENDO Calm + Focus:** specialised nutrition anti-stress beverage

the development of the previously stronger sports drinks category.

The new tax on sugar-sweetened drinks will come into force from April 2018. The first tax band will apply to drinks containing more than 5g sugars per 100ml; a second higher rate will apply to drinks containing more than 8g sugars per 100ml. There are few popular sugar-sweetened drinks containing less than 5g of sugar, although there are a few lemonade style products containing less than 8g. So for close-to-the-margin drinks, less-than-eight may be the instruction to development technologists working in the beverage sector.

But some sweet drinks will not be affected by the taxation planned (fruit juice, sweetened dairy drinks). And some adults may be unaware that typical intakes of free sugars from alcoholic drinks could be higher than their intakes from fruit juices (10% vs 8% in the NDNS survey published in 2014).

The issues for the soft drinks industry are the development of newer, different and perhaps also healthier products. Anything is possible, but all developments depend on consumers being willing to pay for items rather than the alternative consumer drink choices of tap water or homemade teas and coffees. Vegetable blends can boast solid nutrient contents, but will they pass the taste challenge? Coconut waters are currently popular, and claim modest health benefits, but they are pricier and their very delicate flavours limit their appeal to some groups. Many herbal and esoteric flavoured drinks are announced, but few seem to hold out over current competition. Drinks launched at the trade food-to-go exhibition, Lunch! (September 2016) offer exotic ingredients and make vague health claims, but how many will ever hit national retailer shelving? (See Table 1.)

Dietitians know that there are perfect drinks for every occasion. For daily hydration, tap water is best; tea is popular and coffee also delivers a regular dose of joy to many people. For celebration and social ease, wines and beers offer, in moderation, well-proven benefits. Juices deliver a convenient and delicious way to consume some intake of fruit and vitamins, especially C.

Other sweet drinks are attractive, but need some rules. Sweet carbonates are an intense-taste pleasure, but should not be a main source of hydration, as they may contain caffeine and acidity, and may nurture the sweet-tooth, especially in children. Sports drinks perhaps, sometimes, bring benefits to people actually doing vigorous sports. And if you have been working really hard all day long on a construction site, or in a field, or on a production line, then perhaps you deserve an energy drink. Otherwise, not.