

AN INCREASING HEALTH RISK: BEVERAGE OVERCONSUMPTION IN PAKISTAN

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The dietary habits of Pakistani people are undergoing a major shift due to rapid urbanization and lifestyle modification. There is an alarming rise in consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and other harmful drinks.¹ I am writing this editorial to express my concern about the growing consumption of beverages in Pakistan and its impact on health.

Carbonated beverages have become an essential part of household food consumption in Pakistan. The prevalence of carbonated beverage consumption increases with household wealth.² The rates of sugar-sweetened beverage consumption have increased remarkably, as shown in a multiethnic study done in KSA with results showing an association between consumption and certain social demographic variables and obesity.³ Young people, frequently subjected to assertive marketing initiatives by beverage corporations, are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon. The pharmacy department of Jinnah Sindh Medical University conducted a clinical survey and found that 85.76% of Karachi's population consumed soft drinks. The majority of them were teenagers aged 15–25.⁴

Excessive intake of sugar-sweetened drinks (SSBs) and other beverages with high calorie content has been associated with a range of negative health effects. Such a lifestyle contributes significantly to the rise in obesity prevalence in Pakistan, stunting almost 40% of children and making 41% of adults obese.⁵ We used a population-based household survey to collect data for a study which revealed that overall, 22.8% of the participants were overweight, and 5.1% were obese. (6)

In Pakistan, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes is increasing, and our dietary habits, in addition to genetic factors, have played a significant role.

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In Pakistan, the consumption of sweetened beverages in excess is a significant risk factor for the development of diabetes. Statistics indicate that Pakistan is the third most affected country in the globe, following China and India, with over 33 million adults affected by diabetes. Obesity and an increase in sugar consumption, which encompasses sweetened beverages, are the primary causes of diabetes.⁷

Moreover, excessive intake of soft drinks, especially acidic beverages, can lead to complex dental complications such as dental caries and erosion.⁸ Sucrose is the most cariogenic carbohydrate; however, the mechanism is largely unknown. One study hypothesized that sucrose induces an imbalance in the microbiota, thereby favoring a greater degree of caries.⁹

Excessive use of beverages not only affects human well-being but also places a significant cost burden on the healthcare system. A 2014 study in Karachi found that the average direct cost of diabetes treatment in Pakistan was approximately 5500 PKR per month.¹⁰ Keeping in view the inflation in Pakistan, the cost has tripled now. It is critical to address this issue in order to reduce healthcare expenses and improve people's overall well-being.

A comprehensive strategy involving government regulations, public awareness campaigns, and community participation can tackle the issue of excessive beverage consumption in Pakistan. The government should prioritize enacting regulations aimed at reducing the consumption of beverages. This involves implementing tariffs and taxes on these products, labelling nutritional deficiencies on these products, and curbing motivational marketing strategies.

We should organize workshops, seminars, and walks to raise public awareness about the harmful health impacts of these beverages. We can use large-scale media and social media to target a large audience with ads that advocate for healthy drinks like water, unsweetened tea, and natural fruit juices.

Community-based activities promote nutritional beverages. Local organizations, schools, and companies should encourage water consumption and limit access to sugary beverages in their surroundings.

Overconsumption of beverages is a significant health problem in Pakistan that requires prompt action to address. By implementing comprehensive methods centered on regulation, education, and community involvement, we can effectively reduce the increasing consumption of harmful beverages and alleviate their negative health effects. Collaborative endeavor is imperative to guarantee a healthier future for the Pakistani population.

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