For decades, people have turned to diet soft drinks as a healthier alternative to regular soft drinks. However, consuming diet soda on a regular basis may have some serious health ramifications, including weight gain.

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that diet sodas may be causing people to gain weight, particularly because these sodas are commonly consumed by people who are trying to lose weight. However, artificial sweeteners found in some diet sodas may increase a person's risk of obesity. It's not entirely what people are eating that can cause weight gain but what the body thinks it is eating (or drinking) that plays a role.

There are two factors at play with regard to the artificial sweetener conundrum. First, The University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio has researched the potential link between obesity and artificial sweeteners. Researchers have found that something in the chemical structure of these sweeteners alters the way the brain processes the neurotransmitter serotonin.

In addition to helping with sleep, mood and other functions in the body, serotonin helps tell the body when it is full. When natural foods and sugars are consumed, serotonin signals to the brain to turn off the body's appetite. However, artificial sweeteners may prolong the release of serotonin, and one's appetite remains in full force long after it should have abated.

Another component of artificial sweeteners, particularly aspartame, is that these chemicals can trick the body into thinking it has, in fact, consumed sugar. That triggers the pancreas to produce the insulin needed to regulate blood-glucose levels. It also causes the body to store the glucose as fat. This can lead to low blood sugar, which may cause people to eat a sugary treat in response.

Having diet soda or eating a sugarless item once in a while won't create any long-term effects, but repeatedly relying on artificial sweeteners could affect appetite and change blood sugar levels for good.

These aren't the only consequences to diet soda and other beverages. Drinking diet soda

regularly may affect cardiovascular health. According to the American Heart Association, research presented at the American Stroke Association's International Stroke Conference found people who drink diet soda every day have a 61 percent higher risk of vascular events than those who reported no soda consumption.

Regular soda isn't a better alternative. It can contribute to weight gain and cardiovascular issues as well as an increased risk for diabetes. A 2011 review published in the journal "Circulation" stated that a positive association has been shown between sugar-sweetened soft drink consumption and weight gain in both children and adults.

Nutritionists and doctors have advised that instead of adding artificial sweeteners to water and other beverages, flavor them with lemon or lime juice. Instead of drinking diet soda, opt for unsweetened tea or plain water.

Although diet soda may seem a likely option to help curb calories and prevent weight gain, such beverages may actually be having an adverse effect on a person's weight.

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