Over the past 50 years, soda pop has changed from an occasional treat into an everyday beverage. We’re practically drowning in soft drinks. Americans are now consuming twice as much soda as we did 30 years ago, and five times as much as 50 years ago.

Professor Gladys Block, of the University of California at Berkeley, has analyzed the government’s national food-consumption surveys and found that carbonated soft drinks are the single biggest source of calories in the American diet. They provide 7 percent of all calories.

Today, CSPI is releasing its analyses of soft-drink consumption by teenagers, using the government’s surveys from 1999 to 2002, the most recent data available. We found that teens were getting 11 percent of their calories from soda pop. That’s one-fourth more than what they were getting five years earlier. Adding in noncarbonated fruit drinks, soft drinks provided 13 percent of teenagers’ calories. Those noncarbonated drinks pretend to be rich in fruit, but they contain negligible amounts of fruit juice and are nutritionally equivalent to soda.

The average teenage boy is now drinking the equivalent of two 12-ounce cans of soda pop a day, and the average girl 1½ cans. Adding in fruit drinks increases those amounts to 2½ cans a day for boys and 1¼ for girls. Of the boys who drink soda or fruit drinks, one out of 10 is drinking the equivalent of 5½ cans or more per day—800 calories worth. And one out of 20 boys is drinking 7 or more cans per day—over 1,000 calories worth.

Despite all the concern about obesity, teenagers drink 22 times as much regular soda and fruit drinks as diet soda. Despite all the concern about osteoporosis and calcium, teenagers drink three times as much soft drinks as milk. They drink only 9 ounces of milk per day.

Soft-drink companies are doing everything they can to pump up consumption, health be damned:

• They make the products universally available, including in 92 percent of high schools and even 25 percent of elementary schools, according to the Centers for Disease Control.
• They spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year on advertising.
• They’re offering ever larger containers: the half-gallon Big Gulp at 7-Eleven, the 24-ounce single-serve bottles in grocery stores, and 3-liter bottles at drug stores. (Compare those containers to the standard 6½-ounce Coke that satisfied people in the 1950s.)
• And, because they’re basically selling water and high-fructose corn syrup, they easily undersell milk and orange juice. That 3-liter bottle cost me just one dollar, less than the cost of a bottle of milk that is one-third the size.

Fortunately, in recent years, a rebellion against soft drinks has been brewing:

• Medical research is providing strong evidence that soft drinks are contributing to the nation’s obesity epidemic. Dr. Caroline Apovian will discuss that issue in a few minutes.
• More and more parents and school officials are opposing the marketing of soft drinks in public schools. Cities from New York to Los Angeles are banning soft drinks from most
or all schools. In a moment, Lucy Nolan will describe her group’s efforts to get soft
drinks out of schools in Connecticut.

• Third, a spate of popular diet books—including Sugar Busters, the South Beach Diet, and
the Atkins diet—has labeled sugary soda pop a prime cause of obesity.
• Finally, the government’s 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans urges “decreased
intake of such foods, especially beverages with caloric sweeteners, ... to reduce calorie
intake and help achieve recommended nutrient intakes and weight control.”

Thanks to factors like those, for the first time in decades, per capita production of soft drinks has
been declining. Between 1998 and 2004, overall production of carbonated soft drinks declined
by 7 percent, and production of non-diet soft drinks declined by a remarkable 12 percent.

Today, to maintain that downward momentum, CSPI is announcing, in addition to the new
consumption data, two actions. First, we are publishing an updated edition of our report “Liquid
Candy.” The report summarizes the scientific research on soft drinks’ harm to health. That
research indicates that soft drinks contribute to obesity, inadequate intake of vitamins and
minerals, weakened bones and osteoporosis, tooth decay, and kidney stones. The harm is due
either to the sugars, caffeine, and acids in soft drinks or to the replacement of more-healthful
foods by soft drinks. “Liquid Candy” has become a “must-have” document for parents,
educators, and others who are opposing the sale of soft drinks and other junk foods in schools.

Second, CSPI, with support from numerous nutrition experts and several organizations, is
formally petitioning the Food and Drug Administration to require brief health messages on
containers of soft drinks, be they carbonated or noncarbonated. The messages would mirror
statements in the 2005 edition of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans—the government’s basic
nutrition policy—and other government statements. We’re suggesting that the notices vary from
container to container and state such things as:
• Drinking too much non-diet soda may contribute to weight gain.
• Drink fewer non-diet soft drinks to help prevent tooth decay.
• A 12-ounce serving of this drink contains 40 milligrams of caffeine, a mildly addictive
stimulant drug. Not appropriate for children.
• Drinking soft drinks instead of milk or calcium-fortified beverages may increase your
risk of brittle bones (osteoporosis).

We recognize that such messages won’t immediately solve the obesity problem—but they would
be a useful reminder to both adults and kids to drink less. And they would signal to consumers
that the government is seriously concerned about the impact of soft drinks on health. To have a
greater impact on consumption and obesity, the federal government, states, and cities need to
take many additional steps, such as sponsoring major mass-media dietary-change campaigns,
requiring chain restaurants to list calories on their menus and menu boards, and getting soft
drinks, candy bars, and similar foods out of schools.

The need for such actions is great, and the time to act is now.