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They're flavorful and colorful with names such as Frost, Rain, Xtremo, Fierce, Mountain Blast and Arctic Shatter. What kid wouldn't want a sports drink during soccer, baseball or hockey practice? Sports drinks are everywhere and are heavily marketed at youth and adolescents.

According to the ads, these drinks not only look and taste good but can improve sports performance while replacing key vitamins and minerals, something we all want for our kids.

But are the ads correct? What isn't quite so clear in the advertising is the amount of calories in one bottle and what type of performance can be improved.

The idea that sports drinks can enhance sport performance is well-accepted. However, the effect is apparent only during higher-intensity, longer-duration activities, usually in excess of 60 minutes. Anything less, and water should be the drink of choice.

The hidden calories of sports drinks are another concern. A bottle of Gatorade is considered four full servings and has 200 total calories. POWERade has 120 calories. This is a lot of calories, especially since your children might not even use this many calories in their practice or games. Even tennis star and POWERade spokesperson Venus Williams says, "I have a nutrition plan and need to rehydrate without the calories." POWERade vice president of marketing Matt Kahn states, "... even an elite athlete is going to be careful about consuming wasted calories."

In response to this and to health advocates pressuring for healthier drinks for kids, drink manufacturers recently introduced no- or low-calorie sports drinks. These new drinks provide considerably fewer calories than past products, yet still retain all of the flavor and performance enhancement potential. Specifically, the amount of calories per 8 ounces (remember, all the bottles in the store are much larger than 8 ounces) is: 50 for Gatorade, 35 for POWERade, 25 for G2, 10 for flavored Propel Fitness Water and 0 for POWERade Zero. Plain water also contains zero calories, comes at little or no cost and is the healthiest thing a kid can drink during practice.

If you still want to get the "popular" drink for your sports-minded kids, opt for the low- or no-calorie choices. Otherwise, stick to water; it is still the best drink around.

Sports beverages: Are they needed?

