

## **PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.  
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent

### Latest Fad – Plant Waters

Maybe it's because consumers are finally getting the idea that too much fruit juice is still too much sugar. Maybe it's because the food marketers are doing a great job of marketing one more new category. Maybe it's just because we still believe all that they try to tell us and sell us. For whatever reason, plant water is now one of the hottest categories of new drinks in the store. There are the As – Artichoke and Aloe, the Bs – Birch and Barley, the Cs – Coconut and Cactus and Chocolate, then on to Maple and Watermelon so far. Are the health benefits worth the price?

That price is something to consider. At \$5 or more for a 10 to 20 ounce bottle, that's costly stuff. A 16 oz bottle of water is 99 cents if you buy just one at the corner store, less if you get a carton of them in the grocery, and way, way less if you fill one from your tap. So whatever is in these fancy plant-flavored water bottles had better be really good! That's the next question.

These are waters. That means that they are very dilute. Some are the sap from the tree – maple and birch. Some have been squeezed or pressed from the plant – aloe and cactus. Some are made by soaking plants in water, or just flavoring water. So no matter what is in them, it will be dilute.

Then there are the other ingredients added to make them meet our expectations of taste. Some are sweet on their own. Maple comes with its own sugar. A 10 ounce bottle has one tablespoon of sugar, 60 calories' worth. Sure, it is maple sugar, but still those calories can add up if you drink several in a day. Many have some flavoring and sweetening added. If it's stevia then there are no added calories. But some are sweetened with sugar, to the tune of 50-60 calories per bottle. That's enough to add some pounds if you're not careful. And some have added flavors, which may be natural or artificial. Why pay for a 'natural' water if it's flavored with fake grape?

But are the other ingredients in the waters worth it? That's probably the hardest question of all to answer, because no one knows. There are dozens of health claims about them certainly. But if you look for any real evidence, any real tests of them compared to plain water, or even to the plain whole fruit or vegetable, in real people in real life, the evidence is basically ZIP. Nil. Nothing. Nada.

For example, there's a lot of hype around maple water. The claims are that, in addition to its

mild sweet taste and some minerals, it has something that will help control diabetes and reduce fat. There is a lot of research being done on this abscisic acid, true. Abscisic acid has been known for decades as a plant hormone. It's part of what makes leaves turn color and fall off a tree. Then they found that it's in animals too. So far there's research on fat cells in test tubes, and specially bred mice in labs. You can stuff a lot of a chemical into a mouse in a cage. But as for really looking at whether it does anything in people, it hasn't happened yet. And we don't have leaves to fall off!

Most of these plant waters claim that they have more minerals or more antioxidants than water. Well certainly, since water is just water! Some have been compared to sports drinks. In most cases they were no better than sports drinks, just costlier. Most of the minerals they have are both very dilute, in very small quantities, and not ones that we need more of anyway.

If you really want the benefits of the vitamins, minerals, fiber and other healthful ingredients, then please, eat the plants. Have some watermelon. Eat an artichoke. Use barley instead of rice. It will help keep your cholesterol down. But don't expect barley, watermelon or artichoke water to do much more than lighten your wallet!

Here's a filling salad for warm evenings. Barley can be used like rice in many recipes. It's a little chewier, but does help reduce cholesterol because of the type of fiber it contains. Quick barley cooks in 10 minutes, pearled takes 50, so choose according to how much time you have to cook. To your health!

#### Strawberry Chicken Salad

2 cups cooked barley	1 ½ cups cooked, cubed chicken
1 can (8 ounces) sliced water chestnuts	½ cup sliced celery
½ cup prepared Italian salad dressing	¼ cup sliced green onions
1 cup sliced fresh strawberries	

Drain water chestnuts. Combine cooked barley, chicken, water chestnuts, celery and onions. Drizzle salad dressing over barley-chicken mixture and toss with fork. Chill well. To serve, spoon chilled salad into serving bowl and top with sliced strawberries. Toss lightly to mix. Serves 4.

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