The latest data show that less than one-third of all American adults are normal weight. The fact that we consume 21 percent of our calories from all beverages may be a major factor in the increasing incidence of obesity.

On these hot summer days, we're all motivated to quench our thirst. In larger cities, many coffee shops offer iced coffee drinks. Many times, the calories can add up if the beverage of choice isn't non-caloric. How can you fit a 300, 400 or 500 calorie beverage into your total food intake for the day, or avoid the clever marketing strategies of the $25 billion a year carbonated beverage industry?

Recently, a Beverage Guidance Panel's recommendations of what we should be drinking were published in the "American Journal of Clinical Nutrition." The guidelines provide a ranking system to help consumers make better choices. Rankings range from plain water at Level One to Level Six beverages, which contribute calories without nutrients. Why not make out your own scorecard to see how your beverage choices compare on the basis of sugar, fat, caffeine and calorie content?

For normal metabolism and physiological functions, our bodies only need water. However, many of us prefer flavors in our drinks but don't always take into account what else we may or may not be getting with that pleasant taste. Here's a quick guide to the various levels of the beverage guidelines.

* **Level One:** Water. Recommendation is 20 to 50 ounces per day.
* **Level Two:** Unsweetened tea and coffee. Research has shown that tea offers some health benefits. Caffeine content must be kept in mind for coffee consumption and preferably limited to 400 milligrams per day. Recommendation is 0 to 40 ounces of unsweetened tea and 0 to 32 ounces of unsweetened coffee per day.
* **Level Three:** Low-fat (1.5 percent or 1 percent) and skim (nonfat) milk and soy beverages. Milk is one of the best sources of calcium and vitamin D. Fortified soymilk is a good alternative. Recommendation is 0 to 16 ounces per day.
* **Level Four:** non-calorically sweetened beverages. Diet soft drinks and other calorie-free drinks are preferable to those sweetened with sugar. FDA-approved sweeteners are considered safe. Recommendation is 0 to 32 ounces per day.
* **Level Five:** caloric beverages with some nutrients.
  o **FRUIT JUICES** (100 percent juice) provide nutrients but lack the fiber present in the whole fruit. Fruit smoothies are usually high calorie fruit drinks and not recommended. Recommendation is 0 to 8 ounces per day.
  o **VEGETABLE JUICES** are lower in sugar than fruit juices but higher in sodium. Recommendation is 0 to 8 ounces per day.
  o **WHOLE MILK** provides calcium, protein and Vitamin D, but the saturated fat content has been shown to contribute to the risk of cardiovascular disease. Recommendation is none.
SPORTS DRINKS can replace sodium, chloride and potassium, which are important electrolytes lost during endurance activities, but additionally they may contribute unnecessary calories. Recommendation is 0 to 16 ounces per day; preferably limited to endurance athletes.

ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES may contribute health benefits in moderation. Recommendation is 0 to 1 drink per day for women and 0 to 2 drinks per day for men. One drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits. NOTE: Pregnant women should not consume alcohol.

* Level Six: Sweetened caloric beverages without nutrients. This option offers no nutritional or caloric benefit to a healthy population. This category includes carbonated and non-carbonated beverages generally sweetened with high fructose corn syrup or sucrose (sugar). Recommendation is no more than 8 ounces per day.

To read the details in the report, go to www.beverageguidancepanel.org

Multigrain Muffins

½ cup all-purpose flour  
½ cup cornmeal  
½ cup quick-cooking oats  
1/4 cup whole wheat flour  
3 tablespoons toasted wheat germ  
2 tablespoons baking powder  
1/4 teaspoon salt  
1 egg, slightly beaten  
1 cup skim milk  
1/4 cup canola oil  
1/4 cup chopped walnuts  
1/4 cup raisins

In a bowl, combine the first eight ingredients. In another bowl, combine egg, oil and milk. Stir into dry ingredients, just until moistened. Fold in walnuts and raisins.

Coat muffin cups with nonstick cooking spray. Fill two-thirds full with batter. Bake at 375 degrees for 15 - 18 minutes or until a toothpick comes out clean. Cool for 5 minutes before removing from pan to a wire rack. Yield: 1 dozen