

Coca-Cola puts new sweetener in U.K. Sprite

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It's about to get difficult finding a can of regular Sprite in the United Kingdom.

Coca-Cola says it's replacing Sprite in the country with a version that uses the sweetener stevia and has 30 percent fewer calories. Sprite Zero, which doesn't have any calories, will also be available.

The change by the world's biggest beverage maker is in response to a government push calling on companies to address obesity. Coca-Cola already made a similar move with Sprite in France last year.

Stevia is a sweetener extracted from a plant of the same name. Food makers have been trying to use the non-caloric sweetener to reduce calories, but one hurdle has been masking its bitter aftertaste in some drinks.

Sprite is Coca-Cola's fifth most popular brand in the United Kingdom, after Coke, Diet Coke, Schweppes and Fanta.

The announcement came ahead of the airing of Coca-Cola's anti-obesity TV ad in the United Kingdom. That ad first aired in the United States in January amid increasing fire over the role sodas play in fueling obesity rates. Next week, for example, New York City is set to enact a first-in-the-U.S. ban on sugary drinks bigger than 16 ounces in restaurants, movie theaters and other venues.

In the Coca-Cola ad, a narrator notes that obesity "concerns all of us." It

also explains that weight gain is the result of consuming too many calories of any kind—not just soda.

A Coca-Cola spokeswoman said the ad will roll out to other countries throughout the year, although she didn't yet have a list. She said the company is still exploring whether to bring the Sprite with stevia to the U.S.

But the company has already been experimenting with reduced-calorie versions of Sprite and Fanta that use stevia in select U.S. markets since this summer.

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