

GH REPORT

What you really need to know about SUGAR

Move over, carbs and fat – sugar is the latest food to become public enemy number one. But is it really that bad for us? GH sorts the facts from the fiction



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Good news: you may not
have to cut out your
favourite treats completely

Sugar has been called sweet poison, the main culprit behind obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Anti-sugar campaigners have claimed it's as dangerous as alcohol and tobacco. But could

something we've been eating for ever really be so bad, or has it all been a bit of a storm in a teacup (with two sugars, please)? While it's true there is no physiological need for any of us to eat added sugar, we're hardwired to desire sweet food. Sugars found naturally in whole fruit, veg and milk are generally OK as part of a balanced diet. It's added sugar (put in during processing and preparation) that we need to worry about. But there's no need to cut out dessert: the key is to eat strategically.

IS IT REALLY THAT BAD FOR US?

Eating too much sugar has been implicated in a range of diseases from dental decay to obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. In a nutshell, eating too much sugar can cause fat build-up in the liver, which can lead to many of these problems. The question is, how much is too much? According to a recent study, people who got 25% of their daily calories from added sugar (equivalent to 125g a day or 31 teaspoons of sugar) had three times the risk of dying from cardiovascular disease than those who consumed less sugar. This is considerably more than the World Health Organisation's 50g upper limit - so don't beat yourself up if you have the occasional digestive biscuit (2.5g sugar) or odd dollop of ketchup (4g). It's a question of balance and it's important to realise that there isn't just one thing that causes these diseases.

IS SUGAR ACTUALLY A POISON?

It's probably a little far fetched to call sugar a poison as it depends on the context and dose. The majority of the studies linking sugar (or more specifically fructose, which makes up half of sucrose) with disease have been done with rodents (not humans), which were fed up to 300g of fructose a day, equivalent to 600g sugar

or 17 cans of cola! Clearly not a typical intake for most of us. In any case, rodents metabolise fructose in a very different way, so the results cannot be applied to human beings.

CAN IT CAUSE TYPE 2 DIABETES?

Research does show that sweetened foods can up your diabetes risk - adding one extra serving of a sugary drink a day increases risk by 22%, according to a 2013 European study - but sugar alone isn't necessarily enough to cause the disease. Researchers say it's eating too many calories - including those from sugar - that's the issue, as it can lead to weight gain. And being overweight greatly increases the risk of type 2 diabetes.

ISN'T SUGAR ADDICTIVE?

Just because you crave chocolate doesn't mean you're addicted to sugar, say researchers. Sweet cravings are a potent combination of nostalgia (the memory of your mum's freshly baked cakes), habit (always having a pudding) and reward (the release of feel-good hormones, like dopamine and serotonin, after eating sugar). Eating sweet things just makes us happy.

DOES THE WHITE STUFF MAKE YOU FAT?

Sugar contains calories so, as with any food, if we eat too much of it, we gain weight. It is not uniquely fattening but it makes

foods more appealing and palatable, and so makes us want to eat more.

ARE 'NATURAL' SUGARS OK TO EAT?

Naturally occurring sugars in fruit, vegetables and dairy products aren't considered harmful, as the natural sugars occur in relatively small amounts. Plus, these foods contain essential vitamins and minerals, along with water and fibre, which slow down the absorption of sugars in the bloodstream and avoid insulin spikes. However,

'natural' sugars in fruit juices and smoothies are no better for you than added sugar in soft drinks. Removing the fibre means the sugars in juices and smoothies are more concentrated and absorbed by the body very fast. Most juices contain as much sugar as cola. For example, 250ml of apple juice contains 97 calories and 24g sugar, and 250ml of cola typically contains 104 calories and 26g sugar.

WHAT ABOUT CALORIE-FREE SWEETENERS?

The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) has decided that aspartame, stevia, sucralose and other calorie-free sweeteners are safe. They may be a good alternative to sugar if you're trying to cut calories but, long term, you may want to think about reducing your intake of things like 'diet' drinks, as they won't quell your desire for a sweet taste.

GH VERDICT

There's no doubt that eating too much sugar (as with any food) is bad for our health. Most people would benefit from cutting down, especially if they need to lose a few pounds. We say that you can eat added sugar and have an overall healthy diet, provided you have only small amounts of it.

YOUR DAILY SUGAR LIMIT IS

50g



The amount that's in 2 cupcakes (tempting, but not the sensible option)

IN REAL LIFE THE AVERAGE PERSON'S DAILY INTAKE IS

60g



THE DANGER ZONE

People who get 25% of their calories from added sugar - 125g a day, or the amount in 5 cupcakes - have 3 times the risk of heart disease



9 WAYS TO CUT SUGAR FROM YOUR DIET

1 Give your palate time to adjust and wean yourself off sugar a little at a time. Cut the amount of sugar, honey, etc. you add to foods and drinks by half. Gradually, use even less. If you must eat something sweet at the end of a meal try plain yogurt or fresh fruit.

2 Ditch sugary drinks. They're a source of empty calories and show the strongest relationship with obesity and type 2 diabetes. In one US study consuming one sugary drink a day meant 15lb of weight gain over a year. The problem is that it's easier to over-consume calories in liquid form. Replace soft drinks, fruit juice and energy drinks with water, low fat milk or unsweetened tea or coffee.

3 Start replacing processed sugary foods (sweets, chocolate, cakes, biscuits and puddings) with natural ones in veg and fruit, which have a less drastic effect on blood sugar levels. Processed foods also stimulate hunger and make it harder to control appetite and body weight.

4 Swap chocolate and sugary snacks for protein – or fibre-rich foods to stabilise blood sugar levels and satisfy hunger. Opt for fresh fruit, a piece of cheese, carrot and celery sticks with hummus, a few nuts, plain yogurt, or oatcakes/rice cakes with peanut butter.

5 Read the label. There are many types of sugar: check labels for sucrose, glucose syrup, invert sugar, fructose, dextrose, maltodextrin, fruit syrup, raw sugar, cane sugar and glucose. So-called health foods can be loaded with added sugars such as agave nectar, honey, organic cane sugar and maple syrup.

6 Go for natural sweetness. Choose fresh fruit or plain yogurt with berries, instead of sweets, cakes, biscuits and pastries. Add fruit to breakfast cereal instead of sugar. But go easy on dried fruit – it's a concentrated source of sugar and easy to overdo.

7 Beware of 'reduced fat' and 'low calorie' foods. These often contain more sugar than their 'full fat' equivalents, since manufacturers replace the fat with other ingredients, including sugar, to improve the taste.

8 Rethink your breakfast. Even so-called healthy cereals such as Special K contain 17% sugar. Apart from porridge, Shredded Wheat and Weetabix, very few qualify as low sugar. Use fruit to sweeten cereal. Better still, opt for eggs, or plain yogurt with fresh fruit and nuts – a higher-protein meal means you feel fuller for longer.

9 Don't alter recipes. Better to look for low-sugar alternatives like our triple-tested Low Sugar Banana Bread at goodhousekeeping.co.uk. Try also sweeter spices like cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, almond extract, ginger or lemon. □



WORDS: ANITA BEAN | PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY, PLAIN PICTURE



HOW MUCH SUGAR IS THERE IN...?

Ice cream (two scoops, 100g) **215** calories = **16g** sugar = **4** teaspoons

Cola (1 can, 330ml) **139** calories = **35g** sugar = **9** teaspoons

Chocolate cake (1 slice, 75g) **355** calories = **21g** sugar = **5** teaspoons

Apple juice (1 glass, 250ml) **97** calories = **24g** sugar = **6** teaspoons

1 blueberry muffin (coffee shop) **448** calories = **28g** sugar = **7** teaspoons

Milk chocolate (50g) **263** calories = **27g** sugar = **7** teaspoons

Low fat fruit yogurt (150g) **119** calories = **18g** sugar = **5** teaspoons

Coated corn flakes (40g) **166** calories = **14g** sugar = **4** teaspoons

1 chocolate-covered biscuit (20g) **100** calories = **5g** sugar = **1** teaspoon

Cream of tomato soup (½ can, 200ml) **110** calories = **5g** sugar = **1** teaspoon

1 jam doughnut (70g) **239** calories = **13g** sugar = **3** teaspoons

1 tbsp tomato ketchup (15ml) **18** calories = **4g** sugar = **1** teaspoon

Pasta sauce (100g) **48** calories = **5g** sugar = **1** teaspoon

White sliced bread (1 slice, 40g) **92** calories = **1g** sugar = **¼** teaspoon

*1 teaspoon = 4g sugar

