

## IN THE KNOW ABOUT NUTRITION

Volume: 2017 Issue: 6

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### *What's the Deal with Sugar?*

According to Forbes, the average American consumes over 130 pounds of sugar each year. That is 2 ½ pounds per American every week. This is an alarming amount of sugar consumption which is significant to our current obesity epidemic.

#### **Where Does Sugar Come From?**

There are two types of sugar that occur in food, they are known as natural sugars and added sugars. **Natural sugars** are naturally found in foods such as fruit and milk. **Added sugars** include any sugar or caloric sweetener that is added to foods and beverages to improve the overall flavor and to extend the shelf life. Added sugars and syrups can be used in the preparation of an item such as putting sugar in coffee or cereal. They can also be added while the food is being processed such as high fructose corn syrup. Added sugars are commonly found in:

- sugar-sweetened beverages
- grain-based desserts
- fruit drinks
- dairy desserts
- candy
- ready-to-eat cereals
- yeast breads

In the American diet, sugar-sweetened beverages make up the largest source of added sugars. The American Heart Association suggests that they should be limited to no more than 36 ounces a week.

#### **Is Sugar Really Bad for Me?**

A study published in 2013 by the Journal of the American Heart Association displayed strong evidence that sugar can actually affect the pumping mechanism of your heart and could increase the risk

for heart failure in those who consume high amounts of sugar in their diets.

Sugar alone does not cause diabetes; however, it does increase the risk of developing obesity, high triglycerides, high blood pressure and high cholesterol that does pose a higher risk for developing diabetes.

The Dietary Guideline for Americans 2010, states that “although the body’s response to sugar does not depend on whether they are naturally present in food or added to foods, sugars found naturally in foods are part of the food’s total package of nutrients and other healthful components. In contrast, many foods that contain added sugars often supply calories, but few or no essential nutrients and no dietary fiber. Both naturally occurring sugars and added sugars increase the risk of dental caries.”

#### **How Much Sugar Can I Have?**

The American Heart Association recommendations are based on sugar in general and suggest that added sugar should be limited as much as possible to maintain a healthy diet. The AHA recommendations are as follows:

- No more than 6 teaspoons or 100 calories a day of sugar for women.
- No more than 9 teaspoons or 150 calories a day for men.

Research shows the average American is consuming 22 teaspoons of sugar a day, which is equivalent to 355 calories. To put this in perspective, a 12oz soda has about 8 teaspoons of sugar or 132 calories.

### How Much Sugar Am I Really Consuming?

Look at the food label when trying to determine how much sugar you are actually eating. In the nutrition facts portion, sugar is listed under carbohydrates and typically written in the form of grams. **There are 4 calories per gram of sugar and 4 grams per teaspoon of sugar.** So if the label says it has 20 grams of sugar, that is 5 teaspoons, or about 80 calories from sugar.

You can also look on the front of the label to get an idea of how much sugar is in a product. The label may include one of the following:

- **Sugar-Free** – less than 0.5 g of sugar per serving.
- **Reduced Sugar or Less Sugar** – at least 25% less sugar per serving compared to a standard serving size of the traditional variety.
- **No Added Sugars or Without Added Sugars** – no sugar or sugar-containing ingredient such as juice or dry fruit is added during processing.
- **Low Sugar** – not defined or allowed as a claim on food labels.

It is also a great idea to look at the ingredients. Words that end in “ose” (dextrose, fructose, glucose, lactose, maltose, sucrose) mean sugar. Other ingredients commonly found include: corn sweetener, corn syrup, fruit juice concentrates, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, malt sugar and molasses.

### Are Artificial Sugars a Good Alternative to Added Sugar?

Unlike regular sugar, artificial sweeteners do not contribute to tooth decay and cavities. They appeal to consumers because they contain virtually no calories compared to added sugars and are typically much sweeter. Currently the FDA recognizes artificial sweeteners as GRAS which stands for “generally recognized as safe.” To be considered safe, they should be consumed in moderation; as large amounts of consumption have been known to cause diarrhea. Common artificial sweeteners include:

- Aspartame (NutraSweet® and Equal®)
- Acesulfame-K (Sweet One®)
- Neotame
- Saccharin (Sweet’N Low®)
- Sucralose (Splenda®)

### How Can I Limit Sugar in My Diet?

**Toss the table sugar.** Cut back on the amount of sugar added to things commonly consumed; like cereal, pancakes, coffee or tea. Try cutting the usual amount of sugar you add by half and wean down from there.

**Swap out the soda.** Buy sugar-free or low-calorie beverages. Water is always the best choice!

**Eat fresh, frozen, dried or canned fruits.** Choose fruit canned in water or natural juice. Avoid fruit canned in syrup. Drain and rinse in a colander to remove excess juice.

**Compare food labels and choose products with the lowest amounts of added sugars.**

Dairy and fruit products will contain natural sugars. Added sugars can be identified in the ingredients list.

**Add fruit.** Instead of adding sugar to cereal or oatmeal, try fresh fruit or dried fruit.

**Cut the serving back.** When baking cookies, brownies or cakes, cut the sugar called for in your recipe by half. Most of the time, you won’t even notice a difference.

**Try extracts.** Instead of adding sugar in recipes, use extracts like almond, vanilla, orange or lemon.

**Replace it completely.** Enhance foods with spices instead of sugar. Try ginger, allspice, cinnamon or nutmeg.

**Substitute.** Switch out sugar with unsweetened applesauce in recipes and use equal amounts.

By limiting the daily amount of sugar consumed, individuals are more likely to: maintain a healthy weight, decrease your risk of heart disease, diabetes and dental decay.

Sources: American Heart Association: Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010; Forbes

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