

eating well



sugar shock

**Are you eating too
much of the sweet stuff?**

You've likely heard the health warnings about the effects of too much salt in your diet: It can rev up your blood pressure. But should you be concerned about how much sugar you consume, too? Recent studies suggest the answer is yes. And health experts say that Americans should take a closer look at how much of this sweet stuff they're actually filling up on.



From 1970 to 2005, the availability of sugar in the American diet jumped by 19 percent. On average, Americans consume 30 teaspoons, or 480 calories, of sugar daily. Teens eat even more, averaging 34.3 teaspoons a day, or 549 calories. Those averages are well above the intake levels suggested by the Institute of Medicine and the World Health Organization. In fact, the American Heart Association recommends a daily sugar boost of no more than about 6 teaspoons, or 100 calories, for women and about 9 teaspoons, or 150 calories, for men.

You may wonder what could possibly be wrong with sugar in your diet. After all, sugar is natural; it's produced from sugarcane or sugar beet. It also adds a sweet finish to your favorite foods. But here's the main problem with sugar: When it's refined and added to foods, it packs in calories but provides no nutrients. Your body doesn't need it to function properly.

A TALE OF TWO SUGARS

Sugars, like starches and fiber, are carbohydrates, which provide energy to the body. In the average American diet, you'll taste two types of sugars: naturally occurring and added. Naturally occurring sugars are just what their name implies. They occur naturally in vegetables, whole fruit, and milk products. The sugar found in fruits and milk is referred to as fructose and lactose. Unlike added sugars, which provide no nutrients, foods containing naturally occurring sugars have vitamins and minerals.

Added sugars include the traditional sweetener you use to crank up your coffee or bake blueberry muffins. It's the type of sugar that's added to foods during preparation or processing. You can count granulated sugar, honey, brown sugar, molasses, malt sugar, and fruit juice concentrates as an added sugar. Another notable one you're likely to recognize: high-fructose corn syrup. These added sugars are the ones that have health experts most concerned.

SUGAR AND YOUR HEALTH

You may already know that eating too many sweet treats can rot your teeth. That's because sugar makes it easier for bacteria to grow in your mouth. But aside from tooth decay, did you know that too much added sugar may also affect your weight and your risk for serious health conditions, such as heart disease?

In the U.S., health experts have noted a correlation between the rise in obesity and the increased consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. In fact, a number of studies suggest a link between filling up on too many sweetened drinks and a higher

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risk for being overweight or obese. But experts believe more research is needed to confirm this connection.

More not-so-sweet news: Some research suggests that loads of sugar, especially from sugar-sweetened beverages, may affect your blood pressure and cholesterol levels, putting you more at risk for heart disease. In a recent study of nearly 4,900 adolescents ages 12 to 18, researchers found that those who consumed more sweetened drinks had higher systolic blood pressure measurements. Another study published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* found that out of approximately 6,100 adults, those who ate more added sugar had higher triglyceride levels and a lower amount of HDL, or “good,” cholesterol in their blood.

HIDDEN SOURCES OF SUGAR

Here are the top six sugar shockers in the American diet:

- Regular soft drinks
- Sugars, such as table sugar, and candy
- Cakes, cookies, and pies
- Fruit drinks such as fruitades and fruit punch
- Dairy items such as ice cream and sweetened yogurt
- Baked goods such as cinnamon toast, honey-nut waffles, and sweetened ready-to-eat cereals

Most of the added sugar we consume comes from regular soft drinks. In fact, by drinking only one can of regular soda, you'll take in 8 teaspoons of sugar, or about 130 calories.

With research showing how too much added sugar may affect your health, what can you do to limit your intake? First, know where to find it. Much of the sugar you eat isn't the kind you physically add for flavor. Simply glancing at the nutrition panel on a food product can give you a sense of how much sugar that favorite treat contains.

In the list of ingredients, you'll find sugars disguised under various names. Look for words ending in “ose,” like maltose or sucrose. Other names include molasses, corn sweetener, raw sugar, honey, high-fructose corn syrup, and fruit juice concentrates. The higher up an ingredient is in the list, the more of it by weight is contained in that food item. Limit foods with added sugars listed in the top three ingredients.

When scanning the nutrition panel, also keep in mind that the line listing the amount of sugar in grams—known as “total sugars”—includes both added and naturally occurring sugars. So if a food item contains some milk or fruit, the number of sugar grams listed will represent both types of sugar. That can make it hard to know just how much added sugar is in a certain food. But it still gives you a solid understanding of which foods you should limit or avoid. ■



TIPS TO TAME YOUR sweet tooth

The nutrition panel is a handy tool; you can use your knowledge of it to choose foods with less added sugar. But it's not the only way to cull your cravings for sweets. Give the following tips a try to further slash your sugar intake:

- Hide your favorite sweeteners—white sugar, brown sugar, honey—in a cabinet. You're less likely to use them if they aren't readily at hand.
- Limit the amount of sugar you add to your coffee, tea, cereal, or other regularly consumed foods. Instead, try fresh or dried fruit on your cereal, or a low-calorie or calorie-free sweetener in your favorite beverage. Artificial sweeteners add sweetness without all the calories. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved aspartame, sucralose, and saccharin as safe to use. However, studies with lab animals have shown that consuming too many artificial sweeteners makes it harder to regulate food intake, eventually leading to obesity. Research is ongoing in this area.
- Choose water, sugar-free drinks, or low-calorie beverages. One-hundred percent fruit juice is better than fruit drinks.
- Cut back on sugar in recipes. Substitute extracts, such as almond and vanilla. Or sprinkle in some spices like ginger, cinnamon, and allspice.
- When baking, consider adding one-third to one-half less sugar in a recipe. Or try unsweetened applesauce; it can be used in equal amounts to the sugar needed.