



Break the Sugar Habit

How to tame a sweet tooth

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by Carol Sorgen, MA
WebMD Feature

Don't eat too many sweets, your mother probably told you. Seems that Mom now has the United Nations on her side. According to a recent report by experts from two UN agencies -- the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization -- we're eating way too much sugar.

Just how much sugar do we eat? You might be surprised, says Lisa Ritchie, EdD, RD, LD, assistant professor of family and consumer sciences and director of the Didactic Program in Dietetics at Harding University in Searcy, Ark.

"The amount of sugar used in this country is somewhere between 40 and 60 pounds per person per year," she tells WebMD. For the year 2000, says Ritchie, that translated into 21.5 million tons, which included the sugars found in baked goods, yeast breads, cereal products, and the high-fructose corn syrup used to sweeten soft drinks.

That there's sugar in those items shouldn't surprise you. But you may be surprised to learn that there's sugar in ketchup, canned vegetables, luncheon meats, bacon, fast-food hamburgers, even sushi, says Nancy Appleton, PhD, author of *Lick the Sugar Habit* and *Lick the Sugar Habit Sugar Counter*.

"Part of the reason for our high intake of sugar is that many foods contain hidden sugars where you'd least expect to find them," Appleton tells WebMD. "And don't be fooled by products that are labeled 'low-fat' or 'diet'," she adds. "Many of these are loaded with sugar to make them taste better."

While a high-sugar diet is not recommended, especially for those watching their weight, it's not the sugar itself that leads to weight gain, says Debbie Strong, MBA, LDN, RD, cardiovascular dietitian at the Ochsner Clinic Foundation in New Orleans.

"If the sugary foods and beverages lead to an increase in your total consumption of calories, then yes, weight gain will happen," she says. "But that's true of any food. Eat too much of anything and you're going to gain weight."

"The main problem with sugar is that most sources (like candy, soft drinks, and desserts) don't provide appreciable amounts of other nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals, and are therefore classified as "empty calories," says Susan Dahlheimer, PhD, professor and chair of food and nutrition at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "Ideally, the consumption of these foods should not replace more nutrient-dense foods, so they should

be used in moderation.” But because we are biologically programmed to prefer sweet foods, says Dahlheimer, trying to eliminate them from our diet altogether doesn’t work.

So how do we reduce our consumption of “empty calorie” sweets? Dahlheimer and other experts offer these tips:

- Try satisfying your sweet tooth with fruits, which are good sources of many vitamins and minerals.
- Choose sweets that provide some nutrients, such as ice cream, frozen yogurt, or desserts that contain some fruits and/or nuts. Though the calories and fat may be higher, the extra nutrients make an important contribution to your diet.
- Don’t completely deprive yourself of foods you really like -- including sweets -- because you’re more likely to binge to satisfy the need they fulfill and may end up consuming more calories overall. Instead, set reasonable, flexible goals for including sweets in your diet.
- Learn to separate physical hunger from emotional hunger. If you eat from emotional hunger (stemming from boredom, stress, or loneliness, for example) you’re more likely to overeat low-nutrient foods.
- Prepare recipes with half, or two-thirds, of the sugar originally called for.
- When you crave something sweet, try a teaspoon or two of jam or preserves on a slice of whole wheat toast, or dip a few strawberries in some confectioner’s sugar.
- Reduce the sugar you take in at breakfast by using unsweetened cereal and adding your own sweetener. You’ll probably add less sugar than would have been added by the manufacturer.

Artificial sweeteners are one obvious way to cut down on the amount of sugar you take in, but they’re not always necessary, says Melanie Polk, MMSc, RD, FADA, director of nutrition education for the American Institute for Cancer Research. It’s important to remember that sugar only has 16 calories per teaspoon, says Polk: “That’s a minuscule amount of calories.”

To put it into perspective, eating a large slice of chocolate cake and then sweetening your tea with an artificial sweetener doesn’t make much sense in the whole scheme of things, she says. “If you are sweetening five or six cups of coffee or tea throughout the day, however,” Polk says, “then it might make a difference in total calories.”

To control your sugar sprees, she recommends not keeping temptation around the house in the first place. Go out for your treats, or ask your family to hide them. If you do keep sugary snacks on hand for the rest of the family, think small. “A mini bag of M&Ms will do the trick,” Lichten tells WebMD. “There’s no need to keep a big bag nearby.”

Finally, give yourself permission to enjoy your sugary treats. Lichten, for example, allows herself one dessert a day, but limits it to no more than 300 calories. “Wait for your favorites,” she says “but make sure they’re part of your plan.”

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Medically reviewed by Michael W. Smith, MD.

Sugar Addiction Drives Childhood Obesity

Byron Richards, CCN

It's obvious to just about anyone that excess sugar consumption makes you fat. Now we even have data to prove that excessive sugar consumption, mostly from sweetened drinks like soda, is up at a rate that would require a 1 hour jog per day just to burn off the extra calories. Since most children aren't doing the exercise the excess sugar consumption is a driving force behind the obesity epidemic. How much high fructose diabetic syrup can any human being process?

I used to be of the opinion that it is a free country, if people want to consume that garbage then let them – it's their life. There are a few problems with that way of thinking. Excess sugar consumption, especially toxic substances like high fructose corn syrup, creates addiction that is as powerful as nicotine or alcohol. Parents are doing it to themselves and their children are following right along – especially in poorly educated and less well off segments of society.

In the coming health care reform, the staggering costs of self-inflicted obesity will be shared by those who have taken care of themselves – hardly a fair arrangement. Since the amount of money to care for the consequences of obesity could easily topple our economy and the costs will be disproportionately paid for by productive individuals, our government should take action now to prevent class warfare and economic ruin.

Unfortunately, our government thinks the solution is in education and changing behavior. I'm sorry to inform them but most people already know what junk food is, they just eat it anyway because they are addicted to it. It seems that politicians don't have the guts to tackle this problem head on – dealing with the source of the issue. I hear a lot of talk about reducing the influence of lobbies in Washington, but I see little tangible action that steps on Big Pharma's toes or reduces the influence of the junk food industry.

The companies that are poisoning and addicting our citizens with garbage must be made to stop. Advertising of trash food (like unproven drugs) should be banned. Outlets and easy access to trash food must be reduced in any community. Exercise breaks must replace snack breaks in our public education system. Consulting the "intelligence" of an addicted consumer public is likely to have little benefit. The staggering costs of addiction to junk food will destroy our real freedom as a nation unless we act to restore a healthy food supply and teach children how to prepare food. Is there a candidate for president that has a real health plan?