

Added Sugar in the Diet

The Nutrition Source – Harvard School of Public Health

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Your body doesn't need to get any carbohydrate from added sugar. That's why the Healthy Eating Pyramid says sugary drinks and sweets should be used sparingly, if at all, and the Healthy Eating Plate does not include foods with added sugars

4 grams of sugar = 1 teaspoon – an important fact to keep in mind when reading nutrition labels

The average American consumes 22 teaspoons of added sugar a day, which amounts to an extra 350 calories. (27) While we sometimes add sugar to food ourselves, most added sugar comes from processed and prepared foods. Sugar-sweetened beverages and breakfast cereals are two of the most serious offenders.

The American Heart Association (AHA) has recommended that Americans drastically cut back on added sugar to help slow the obesity and heart disease epidemics. (27)

- The AHA suggests an added-sugar limit of no more than 100 calories per day (about 6 teaspoons or 24 grams of sugar) for most women and no more than 150 calories per day (about 9 teaspoons or 36 grams of sugar) for most men.
- There's no nutritional need or benefit that comes from eating added sugar. A good rule of thumb is to avoid products that have a lot of added sugar, including skipping foods that list "sugar" as the first or second ingredient. However, the growing use of alternative sweeteners can make it difficult to determine which ingredients count as sugar, because there are multiple sources of sugar with different names.

By law, The Nutrition Facts Label must list the grams of sugar in each product. But some foods naturally contain sugar, while others get theirs from added sweeteners, and food labeling laws don't require companies to differentiate how much sugar is added sugar.

Sugar-sweetened beverages

Soft drinks are a prime source of extra calories that can contribute to weight gain and provide no nutritional benefits. Studies indicate that liquid carbohydrates such as **sugar-sweetened beverages** are less filling than the solid forms (28)– causing people to continue to feel hungry after drinking them despite their high caloric value. They are coming under scrutiny for

their contributions to the development of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic conditions.

- **The average can of sugar-sweetened soda or fruit punch provides about 150 calories, almost all of them from sugar – usually high-fructose corn syrup. That’s the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of table sugar.**
- **If you were to drink just one can of a sugar-sweetened soft drink every day, and not cut back on calories elsewhere, you could gain 10-15 pounds in a year.**

Cereals and other foods

Choosing whole, unprocessed breakfast foods – such as an apple, or a bowl of steel-cut or old fashioned oatmeal – that don’t have lengthy ingredient lists is a great way to avoid eating added sugars. Unfortunately, many common breakfast foods such as ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, cereal bars, instant oatmeal with added flavoring, and pastries can contain high amounts of added sugars.

Some ingredient lists mask the amount of sugar in a product. To avoid having “sugar” as the first ingredient, food manufacturers may use multiple forms of sugar– each with a different name – and list each one individually on the nutrient label. By using this tactic, sugars are represented separately in smaller amounts, which makes it more difficult for consumers to determine how much overall sugar is in a product.

- **So don’t be fooled – your body metabolizes all added sugars the same way; it doesn’t distinguish between “brown sugar” and “honey.” When reading a label, make sure you spot all sources of added sugars even if they’re not listed as the first few ingredients.**

Sweet treats can be enjoyed in moderation, but make sure you’re aware of added sugars elsewhere in your diet, such as breads, drinks and cereals.

Industry-sponsored labeling programs can also be confusing. One such program, called Smart Choices, drew scrutiny from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2009 for calling one popular cereal –which is 41 percent sugar—a “Smart Choice.” (The Smart Choices program has since been suspended.)

How to spot added sugar on food labels

Spotting added sugar on food labels can requires some detective work. Though food and beverage manufacturers list a product’s total amount of sugar per serving on the Nutrition Facts Panel, they are not required to list how much of that sugar is added sugar versus naturally occurring sugar. That’s why you’ll need to scan the ingredients list of a food or drink to find the added sugar. (29) However, the body doesn’t distinguish between natural or added sugars, so paying attention to total sugar is the key.

- Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight (30), so where sugar is listed in relation to other ingredients can indicate how much sugar a particular food contains.
- Added sugars go by many different names, yet they are all a source of extra calories.

Food makers can also use sweeteners that aren't technically sugar—a term which is applied only to table sugar, or sucrose—but these other sweeteners are in fact forms of added sugar. Below are some other names for sugar that you may see on food labels:

Agave nectar	Evaporated cane juice	Malt syrup
Brown sugar	Fructose	Maple syrup
Cane crystals	Fruit juice concentrates	Molasses
Cane sugar	Glucose	Raw sugar
Corn sweetener	High-fructose corn syrup	Sucrose
Corn syrup	Honey	Syrup
Crystalline fructose	Invert sugar	
Dextrose	Maltose	

References

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