

The Truth About Sugar

Is the sweet stuff really bad for us?

-Jackie Newgent



Walk down almost any aisle in the supermarket, and you'll see everything from canned fruit to ice cream labeled "No Sugar Added" or "Sugar Free." Not one package says "Full of Sugar," but nonetheless we're all consuming it. In fact, sugar can be considered the most popular food additive in America.

Basically, sugars are carbohydrates that occur naturally in foods, like fruit, and that's OK. But the problem is the sugar that's added to our foods. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines "added sugar" as "sugars and syrups that are added to foods or beverages during processing or preparation."

[Read *The 7 Biggest Diet Myths*](#)

The drawbacks of added sugars (and they're big ones): They offer sweetness with little or no nutritional benefits. When you consume added-sugar calories rather than nutrient-rich calories, you're shortchanging your health. And, of course, too much sugar, even if you're eating an otherwise balanced diet, can lead to a calorie overload—and that ultimately means you'll gain weight.

What's more, the American Heart Association (AHA) says that a high intake of added sugars "has been implicated in numerous poor health conditions, including obesity, high blood pressure and other risk factors for heart disease and stroke" as well as "shortfalls of essential nutrients."

The organization suggests a maximum added-sugar intake of 100 calories (about 6 teaspoons) per day for most American women and 150 calories (about 9 teaspoons) per day for most American men. If you're young and highly active, these numbers can be higher; if you're older and sedentary, these numbers will be lower.

If you'd like to reduce your added-sugar consumption, the first step is to know what foods have it. There are obvious culprits: cookies, cakes, and candies, not to mention the little sugar packets you add to coffee or tea. But you might be surprised at where else added sugars can show up: bread, crackers, pizza, pasta sauce, barbecue sauce, ketchup, salad dressing, luncheon meat, soup, yogurt, and even nutrition bars.

Unfortunately, the sugar grams listed on the Nutrition Facts panel on food labels includes all types of sugars—naturally occurring and added. So rather than focus too much on the number of sugar grams, read ingredient lists to determine where the sugar is coming from. Look for these terms, which indicate the presence of added sugars: brown sugar, corn sweetener, corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, glucose, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, invert sugar, maltose, malt syrup, molasses, raw sugar, sucrose, and syrup.

You might also find sugar alcohols listed on ingredient labels. They're not technically considered sugars. They're carbohydrates that are considered reduced-calorie (not artificial) sweeteners, providing about half the calories of sugar. Some sugar alcohols include sorbitol, mannitol, and xylitol. Basically, if the word ends in "ol," it's likely a sugar alcohol. Sugar free gum often contains sugar alcohol.

[Read How Chewing Gum Can Help You Lose Weight](#)

Knowing some sugar-related labeling is helpful, too. Here are some terms:

No Added Sugars: No sugar or sugar containing ingredient is *added* during processing.

Sugar Free: No sugar is in this food, though artificial sweeteners often are. The food product contains less than 0.5 grams of sugars per commonly consumed portion and/or per labeled serving size.

As for your beverages, be super-choosy about them. Check out these stats:

Foods/Beverages	Added Sugar
12 fluid ounces fruit punch	170 calories (11 tsp)
12 fluid ounces cola	150 calories (9 tsp)
12 fluid ounces energy drink	150 calories (9 tsp)
12 fluid ounces sweet tea	110 calories (7 tsp)
12 fluid ounces sports drink	80 calories (5 tsp)
1 teaspoon sugar	16 calories (1 tsp)

This means that one can of soda provides more added sugar than is suggested in an entire day for most women and all of the added sugar suggested in an entire day for most men. In some cases, the added sugar equals the total number of calories in the drink.

And though sugar can have powerful effects on your health, there are some things it doesn't do, regardless of what you may have heard: Research has clearly shown that sugar doesn't cause acne, hyperactivity or diabetes. And it won't make you sick, unless you consume it in excess quantities and in place of nutritious food.

Finally, remember that added sugar does heighten flavor and enjoyment. In some cases, a little bit of added sugar may help boost intake of nutrient-rich foods by making them tastier. So do limit added sugars, but don't feel you need to eliminate them. After all, we deserve a sweet treat once in a while.

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