

SUGAR: The Sweet Paradox



You've heard the rumors: "Sugar's evil. Avoid it at all costs. It is *unhealthy for you and will make you fat*." Hold it. Is sugar taking too many lumps, or is its villainous reputation justified? For years Americans have been urged to choose a diet moderate in sugar. The government's current Dietary Reference Intakes for macronutrients suggest that added sugar should make up no more than 25 percent of daily caloric intake. But many people are still confused about how much and what kind of sugar to consume. As is often the case with nutrition information, there is no simple answer, according to Suzanne Murphy, PhD, RD, who presented a session on this topic at an American Dietetic Association (ADA) conference.

To help you make sense of the whole sugar issue, here's the "sweet and lowdown" from an excerpt of the ADA session, explained by IDEA author Cathy Leman, RD/LD.

1 Natural Sugars Versus Added Sugars. One area that is confusing is whether you should distinguish between sugars that are "added" to the diet and those that occur naturally in foods such as fruit and milk. Many nutrition experts advise people to moderate their intake of added sugars but not naturally occurring sugars. However, because "total sugars" (both added and naturally occurring) are shown as a single value on Nutrition Facts labels, distinguishing between the two can be challenging.

2 Health Consequences of Eating Sugar. Scientists are investigating the question of whether any negative health effects can be directly attributed to sugar in the diet. The only health effect that has been *conclusively* demonstrated is the association between sugar and dental cavities. However, ADA copresenter Julie Miller Jones, PhD, stated that some preliminary data also support a link between high sucrose (ordinary table sugar) intake and increased triglyceride levels (the

chemical form in which most fat exists in the body) in obese people.

In addition some people worry that added sugars increase the likelihood of becoming obese. You may be surprised to learn there is no strong evidence to support a relationship between sugar intake and body mass index (BMI), a measure of body fat based on height and weight. Some studies have even found an *inverse* relationship between sugar intake and BMI, but that may be because overweight people typically underreport the sugar they eat. However, consuming too many *calories* contributes to obesity, and many foods high in sugar are also high in calories.

3 Sugar's Impact on Food Choices. Another topic researchers are weighing in on is a possible connection between eating lots of sugar and eating fewer nutrient-dense foods. Additional studies need to be conducted to determine if excessive sugar intake results in poorer food choices in general. For example we know that replacing milk with soft drinks decreases the amount of calcium consumed. But we *don't* know whether, as a rule, decreasing sugar intake results in higher consumption of more nutritious foods.

Suggestions For Eating Sugar In Moderation

No foods are all "good" or all "bad," according to American Dietetic Association copresenter Diane Quagliani, MBA, RD. Eating should be a pleasurable activity, not a source of constant stress! If you want to moderate your sugar intake without excessive worry, try these tips shared by Quagliani and her copresenters:

- Split a dessert with a friend or take half of it home to enjoy the next day.
- Don't ban sweets from kids' diets; kids who are occasionally permitted a few sweet treats are less likely to overdo it.
- Order a small or medium soft drink instead of the extra large size, and skip the refills.

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