

The War on Sugar

It's hard to open a newspaper or turn on the TV these days without seeing the newest dietary villain: sugar. There is no doubt that sugar leads to disease and could very well be as dangerous as other toxins like cigarette smoke or other food additives that we have learned to avoid, such as trans fats. But, as you may have read in my articles before, villainizing any component of food or nutrition can be a dangerous slippery slope. What might initially seem to be a logical transition for our diet, can unfortunately lead to other nutritional traps and deficits that are just as detrimental.

Limiting sugar is one of the primary keys to improving your health, and there indeed is an abundance of research on the bad effects of sugar and the direction its over-consumption can lead us. For years we have suspected that sugar is a contributor to obesity, but we are just beginning to understand its physiological link to gaining weight and to diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. To understand this link, we must first review the most common types of sugars, their relationships to each other, and why we are seemingly more sensitive to their bad effects than we used to be.

The easiest way to understand the different types of sugar is to begin with table sugar. Table sugar (sucrose) is a compound composed of glucose plus fructose, two naturally occurring sugar components. Glucose is also naturally occurring, and is the sugar used in the body as its primary fuel. Fructose alone is the type of sugar found in fruits. A third common type of sugar is the man-made high-fructose corn syrup (or corn sugar), which is table sugar that has been manipulated in a lab to contain higher than normal amounts of fructose (because fructose is less expensive to produce and acts as a preservative to increase shelf-life of foods—a win-win for food producers). It seems that the digestion of fructose results in the production of by-products that lead to increased fat storage, inflammation, hypertension, and insulin resistance. The body uses glucose (in comparison to fructose) more efficiently as fuel and we see less detrimental effects associated with fat storage. As you recall, fructose naturally occurs in fruit, so how can it be bad?

Consider that prior to 1975, before the introduction of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS); every American took in about 15-25 grams of fructose per day, primarily in fruit and vegetable consumption. Today, the average is closer to 73 grams of fructose. A can of soda contains roughly 25 grams (i.e., one can of soda has more fructose than our average daily intake prior to the existence of HFCS). So, it seems the much more likely scenario is not that we are suddenly sensitive to the effects of processing fructose, we are just taking in much higher amounts than we have in the past. The avoidance of high fructose corn syrup alone, such as in soda, can potentially make a huge difference in your health.

However, we can't place all of the blame on HFCS, as table sugar must be moderated as well. Total sugar intake has risen from the suggested seven teaspoons to about 22 teaspoons per day. Again, table sugar is glucose plus fructose, and if you take in too much you will have the same toxic consequence of too much fructose in your diet and the subsequent increased fat storage, insulin resistance, and cardiovascular disease.

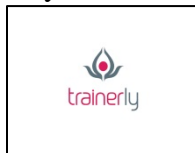
So all sugars, especially HFCS, sound pretty bad and you're ready to jump on the "sugar is evil" bandwagon, but what is this slippery slope? Looking back through nutrition's ever-changing ideals, it is certain that we are a country of "all or nothing." We tend to blame one nutrition component for our woes, although what we blame changes every few years and then we strictly avoid that component. The problem with fructose becoming a villain should be obvious: this is the naturally occurring sugar in fruits and vegetables. The fact of the matter is that we did not see diseases associated with sugar until we began over-consuming processed and junk foods laden with HFCS. Fructose is only dangerous in high amounts and you are simply not going to reach those amounts with fruits or vegetables. Additionally, fruits and vegetables are generally high in fiber and that fiber content will counter the rapid blood sugar spike that decreases your ability to properly metabolize the sugars in them. The take-home message: eat fruits and vegetables, but don't fall into the trap of "counting" their sugars as anything close to evil.

An even bigger concern with the war on sugar is that we are opening the door for sugar substitute producers to capitalize on our newfound fears. After all, if sugar is evil, what better way to avoid it than with a sweet substitute that has no sugar at all? The problem is that people who use sugar substitutes are even more overweight than those who use sugar. Evidence shows that sugar alternatives [such as sucralose (Splenda), aspartame and saccharin] and even natural replacements like agave nectar and stevia tend to lead to increased hunger and increased intake of foods—especially other sugars. And like sugar, when these alternatives are consumed, more efficient storage of fat is triggered in the process (and thus, weight gain along with all of its increased risk factors for disease). If there is any better way to promote obesity than with high sugar and HFCS, it is with the use of sugar substitutes.

The amount and types of sugar we have begun to consume should surely be criminal, but sugar is no villain. Do moderate your sugars. Do teach your children and grandchildren that sugar is a treat, not something that should be used to wash down a meal; and do read your labels to make sure that you aren't getting sugars where you don't suspect them. But don't go down the road of over-generalizing all sugars into the bad category, and don't turn to foods that are made to be "sugar-free." The answer to good nutrition is always balance, and even in the war on sugar, a balance can be struck that will enable and promote your optimal wellness.

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