

Confused About... Sugar?

What is sugar?

Sugar, like starch, is a carbohydrate. Sugar comes in many different forms but all types taste sweet. Sucrose, for example, is the common table sugar extracted from sugar cane and beets and is also added to drinks, baked goods and confectionery. Fructose is naturally found in fruit and honey, and lactose is naturally present in milk.

Glucose is one of the simplest forms of sugar. As well as being part of most other sugars (for example, sucrose is made of glucose and fructose) it is the basic building block of starch, the main form of carbohydrate found in bread, pasta, potatoes, rice, pulses, whole grains and cereals. Glucose is also the type of sugar that circulates in the blood, often referred to as 'blood sugar', and provides the body with energy.

Is sugar bad for you?

No, it's the amount, and how frequently you eat sugar that matters. Most people in the UK eat too much added sugar, for example, in sweets, cakes, biscuits, jams, sugary drinks, puddings, ice cream and packet sugar. If you consume too much sugar at the expense of other foods, your diet can be less nutritious, as foods and drinks rich in added sugars tend to be high in calories, but lower in other nutrients such as protein, vitamins, minerals and fibre.

The only health problem directly linked to sugar is tooth decay. Bacteria in the mouth use sugars to produce tooth-damaging acid. Eating sugar frequently puts teeth at the greatest risk of decay. This is especially true for sugars that have been processed in some way, for example, fruit juice, honey or in foods and drinks containing added sugar rather than those that come naturally pre-packaged in foods like fruit. To help look after teeth, it's best to keep any sugary foods and drinks to mealtimes.

Does sugar make you fat?

Sugary foods and drinks can only make us gain weight if overall we eat more calories than we burn. Since sugary foods taste great and can be rich in calories (think chocolate, cakes, ice cream, biscuits, puddings), it could be easy to consume too many calories from sweet foods and drinks.



Sugary drinks need a special mention since research suggests they make it harder for people to regulate how much they eat overall, and a regular intake may be a factor contributing to obesity in children.

Does eating too much sugar cause diabetes?

No, diabetes is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. However, being overweight does increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. People with diabetes in the family are advised to enjoy a healthy diet and regular exercise to control their weight.

Is sugar addictive?

Studies have suggested it might be for rats, but research with humans is lacking. Sugar helps make food taste so good that, like many enjoyable things, it can stimulate the brain's pleasure centre to release "feel-good" chemicals called endorphins. So it's hardly surprising we like sweet foods - especially when combined with fat. Chocolate is the most craved of all foods! Describing ourselves as 'addicted to chocolate' can simply help us feel better about our strong desire for it.

How much sugar is OK?

A modest amount of sugar can be part of a healthy, balanced diet. The recommended daily limit of added sugars is 10 per cent of our total calorie intake. On average, this equates to around 60g of sugar daily. This includes sugars in honey, jam, fruit juice, soft drinks and processed foods as well as the sugar you add to food.

Many food labels now list the food's sugar content, but don't distinguish between total sugars or just added sugars. So for foods like yogurt, milk drinks or cereals with added dried fruit, some of the sugar will be from lactose or fructose naturally.

Most forms of added sugar end with the letters '-ose', so look out for different forms of sugar when checking ingredient lists (see list).

Remember that the nearer the sugar is to the start of the ingredients list, the greater the amount in the product.

Food fact

One level teaspoon of sugar weighs 4g and contains 16 calories.

The Traffic Light Guide to Sugar Content

The Food Standards Agency has introduced a Traffic Light Labelling Guide to provide 'at a glance' information about the level of fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar in many processed foods. If a food or drink label has a red light for sugar then it is classed as high in sugar, an amber light means it has medium sugar content and a green light means it is low in sugar.



Is brown sugar healthier than white?

Brown sugar contains slightly higher levels of a few minerals, such as, potassium and magnesium, but otherwise, like white sugar, it lacks vitamins, protein and fibre. This is why sugar is often referred to as a form of 'empty calories'. It provides energy, but few nutrients.

Forms of sugar in processed foods

Glucose	Glucose Syrup
Dextrose	Lactose
Fructose	Maltose
Invert Syrup	Hydrolysed Starch
Corn Syrup	Treacle
Raw, Brown or Demerara Sugar	

How to eat less sugar

If you want to eat less sugar, try these ideas:

- Check and compare similar types of packaged and canned foods to look for those with a green or amber traffic light for sugar, or a lower sugar content (or percentage of the Guideline Daily Amount (GDA)) per 100g or per portion. The Food Standards Agency currently recommends this guide to judge if a packaged food is high or low in sugars. Look for the 'Carbohydrates (of which sugars)' figure in the nutrition information panel on the label. High is more than 15g sugars per 100g. Low is 5g sugars or less per 100g. Values in between indicate a medium amount.
- Portion size is also important. While jam is high in sugar, you only use a small amount on your toast, whereas a 500ml bottle of cola provides 54g or 13 teaspoons of sugar.

Sugary food...	Alternative to try...
Sugar-coated breakfast cereals	Wholegrain cereals or porridge oats (try topped with dried or chopped, fresh fruit).
Sweet Biscuits, Cakes, Confectionery	Fresh fruit, dried fruit and nuts or seeds, malt loaf, fruit bun, wholemeal scone
Sweet puddings	Baked apple, summer pudding, yogurt, rice pudding or fromage frais with puréed fruit.
Canned fruit in syrup	Canned fruit in juice
Sugary drinks	Pure juice diluted with fizzy water, diet drinks, milk, fruit smoothies, water
Jam	Reduced-sugar jam, fruit spread, light soft cheese topped with sliced banana or berries
Home baking	Try halving the amount of sugar for in recipes
Sugar in drinks	Gradually reduce it, then cut it out. (Some people may find low-calorie artificial sweeteners useful in drinks, on cereals and in cooking).

By Lyndel Costain, Registered Dietitian

This Food Fact sheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association intended for information only. It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a Registered Dietitian (RD). To check that your dietitian is registered check www.hpc-uk.org. Other Food Fact sheets are available from www.bda.uk.com.
© BDA Updated March 2007