

Sugar

This Food Fact Sheet will help you to understand how sugar may affect your health and wellbeing.

Is the amount of sugar some of us eat and drink, damaging to our health?

Yes. Small amounts used to sweeten foods are fine, preferably at mealtimes. Many of us have too many high-sugar foods and drinks too often. Added sugar is not necessary for a healthy diet.

What kinds of food and drink tend to be high in sugar?

High-sugar foods include many biscuits, cakes, puddings, sweets, chocolate and flavoured yoghurts. Drinks are also a major source of sugar. Sugars added to food or drink can be listed in various ways including sucrose, glucose, syrup, dextrose, honey, fructose, treacle, molasses, lactose, corn syrup or fruit juice concentrates.

How can I tell if a food is high in sugar?

If one of the various forms of sugar is high up the ingredient list, it will be high in sugar. The most reliable source of information is found on the nutrition information panel (on the back of the packet) which lists

'sugars'. This figure is based on all the forms of sugar in the product, added together, to give a total. It is listed 'per 100g' (or per 100mls for drinks), and 'per serving'. High-sugar food contains more than 22.5g per 100g, and a low-sugar food contains less than 5g per 100g. High-sugar drinks contain more than 6.3g per 100ml, and a low-sugar drink contains less than 2.5g. Some products include colour-coded labelling (on the front of the packet) showing colour-coded levels of energy, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt per serving. Red means high, amber means medium, and green means low.



common names for sugars added to foods

maltose
glucose molasses
fructose
sucrose
syrups (e.g. glucose, fructose, corn and maple)
dextrose honey
invert sugar
treacle

How might a high-sugar diet affect your health?

In nature, sugar usually comes with fibre, vitamins, minerals and water – this combination is not harmful and is generally good for us. Fresh fruit, peas, and sweetcorn are good examples. However, modern food processing means that it is easy to extract the sugar and leave the fibre and nutrients behind. Many processed foods are surprisingly high in added sugar. Some experts believe the liver handles high intakes of sugar in a way that is damaging to our health, especially if we are overweight or not physically active. This could lead to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease and other health problems. Also, many high-sugar foods are low in nutrients and fibre. This means that a high-sugar diet can be low in nutritional value.

Does sugar make you overweight?

A small amount of sugar will not make you overweight. A high-sugar diet, typical of many people, may make excess weight gain more likely. High sugar diets are not the only cause of weight gain, too much energy from any source will make you put on weight. A high-sugar intake is linked to weight gain in both children and adults. Sugary drinks are thought to be the biggest problem as they tend to be low in fibre. This means that a lot of sugar can be drunk and digested very quickly. Also, some experts believe that the hormones controlling our sense of hunger and fullness respond differently to a high-sugar diet (from drink or food).

Will sugar rot my teeth?

High sugar intakes often lead to tooth decay. It is important to avoid frequent sugary drinks and snacks for your teeth and your overall health. If you want something sugary, it is best to have it at mealtimes. It's fine to eat fresh fruit as a snack between meals, but the 'free' acid and sugars in pure fruit juices can damage teeth. 'Diet' soft drinks contain little or no sugar; however, most are still acidic enough to harm your teeth if consumed too often. Water and milk, are the best choices for a drink between meals.

Do sugary drinks make children hyperactive?

There is no evidence that the sugar in drinks contributes to hyperactivity in children or that it affects mood, attention or behaviour. A few high-sugar products still use colourings that affect some children's behaviour but most companies have removed these now. If they are used, there will be a warning on the label that the colouring used 'may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children'.

Is it okay to give sweetened drinks to children?

They are not the best choice for children. If they drink fizzy drinks or squashes too often, they might find it hard to appreciate the subtle sweetness

of berries, peas, sweetcorn or other naturally sweet, nutritious foods. Sugary drinks can provide excess energy and unnecessary weight gain and/or they will replace something more nutritious. Dilute any sweet drinks, including fruit juice, with water where possible, and offer at mealtimes only. Please be aware that 'energy drinks' contain caffeine as well as sugar and should not be consumed by children under 16 years of age.



Sugar in fruit

Fruit contains fibre, vitamins, minerals and some sugar. It is a healthy alternative to foods high in added sugars and fat. Pure fruit juices and smoothies provide quite a lot of sugar, some vitamins and minerals, but less fibre than whole pieces of fruit. A small 150ml glass, once a day, is fine.



Summary

In nature, foods containing sugars usually also contain fibre, vitamins and minerals and water. Fruit and some vegetables are good examples of foods we should be eating more of, but which also contain sugar naturally. Many processed foods now have added sugars hidden in them. A limited intake of sugar is fine. However, many people in the UK have too many high-sugar foods and drinks in their diet. Diets high in sugar are linked to diabetes, heart disease, weight gain and tooth decay.

Further information

Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Labelling and Healthy Eating are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts



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To check your dietitian is registered check www.hpc-uk.org

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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