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Added Sugars: What You Need to Know

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Added sugar has become a hot topic among health professionals and in the media. Based on the best available evidence, health professionals recommend that less than 10% of daily calories come from added sugar (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS] & U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2015c) in order to maintain a balanced diet with all the important nutrients. In this fact sheet, we will address why and how to limit added sugar in your diet, what it is, and where to find it.

What is added sugar?

Added sugar is defined as “syrups and other caloric sweeteners used as a sweetener in other food products” (HHS & USDA, 2015b). This only includes sugars added to products during processing and does not include sugars that occur naturally in fruit and milk. Table 1 displays words to look for on food labels to identify added sugars (HHS & USDA, 2015b).

Table 1

Added Sugars Named on Food Labels

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anhydrous dextrose • brown sugar • confectioner’s powdered sugar • corn syrup, dextrose • fructose • high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • honey • invert sugar • lactose • malt syrup • maltose • maple syrup • molasses • nectars (peach, pear, agave) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raw sugar • sucrose (table sugar) • sugar • white granulated sugar • trehalose • turbinado sugar
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Where is added sugar hiding?

An estimated 75% of processed foods contain a sweetener (Ng et al., 2012), most of which are high in calories and low in essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. Sugar can also hide in unexpected

foods (Clemens et al., 2016; Edwards et al., 2016), so it is important to check the nutrition facts label for added sugar. Table 2 shows foods that commonly contain added sugars (Ng et al., 2012; USDA, 2015).

Table 2

Foods Commonly Containing Added Sugars

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• sugar sweetened beverages• packaged fruit products• cereals• infant food• granola and protein bars• salad dressings and dips• fruit and savory snacks• sports and energy drinks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• cakes• cookies• pies• cobblers• fruit drinks• dairy desserts• reduced-calorie diet drinks
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Why does added sugar matter?

While an average of 15-32% of people’s calories come from added sugar in the United States (Edwards et al., 2016), the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends limiting added sugar intake to less than 10% of daily calories (Edwards et al., 2016; HHS & USDA, 2015). High consumption of added sugar (especially above 20%) may put one at risk for a variety of diseases including obesity, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, disruption in insulin function, and dental cavities. Excess added sugar intake, especially from sugar-sweetened beverages, has been associated with these diseases (Vos et al., 2017). However, researchers disagree about whether the sugar itself is the problem or if it is just the added calories (Rippe & Angelopoulos, 2016; Stanhope, 2016). Added sugars make one hungry again faster because they digest quickly (Edwards et al., 2016; Stanhope, 2016, Vos et al., 2017). However, these high sugar foods are typically high in calories but low in other important nutrients. It may be difficult to get enough of these essential nutrients while staying within an appropriate calorie intake with a diet high in added sugar.



Where do I find added sugar information?

Following recent scientific findings, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced new nutrition labelling requirements for packaged food to make it easier to read and display more realistic portion sizes. (Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, 2017). The graphic that follows highlights changes related to sugar on the new label (Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, 2020).

This nutrition facts label shows the amount of nutrients in each serving, but if you want to know what types of sugars are added, check the ingredients list. Ingredients are listed in order by weight with the first ingredients being the largest. Some products such as honey, maple syrup, and cranberry juice have special labeling rules. These products are marked with a “+” symbol next to “added sugars” on the nutrition label (Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, 2019).

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans are created using recent scientific data. These guidelines show the recommended amounts of nutrients (such as , fat, iron, and sodium) that an average person will need every day to live healthily. The % Daily Value shows what percentage of the nutrient recommendations are found in a serving. These percentages are based on a 2,000-calorie diet, but many individuals may need more or less calories every day.

Notice the **servicing size** when reading the nutrition facts label. Servicing sizes have been updated to reflect the amount that is often consumed in one sitting. *The serving size is not a recommendation for the appropriate amount to consume.*

Total sugars include sugars found naturally in the foods as well as any sugars added during processing. There is no % Daily Value because there are no recommendations for total amount to consume in a day.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
Serving size	2/3 cup (55g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	230
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 8g	10%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	13%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 240mg	6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Added sugars includes only the sugars added during processing. While many % Daily Values indicate the minimum recommended amount of that nutrient to consume, the % Daily Value for added sugar indicates

This product contains 10 g of added sugar and 2 g of natural sugar for every 2/3 cup.

How do I avoid added sugar?

It is easier to think of reducing added sugar intake in terms of shifting rather than restricting. Restricting implies that we are depriving ourselves of something we desire. Shifting, however, suggests a slight, gradual change toward more nutrient-dense foods that help us feel our best. As

Overall, gradually shift towards less added sugar to allow your taste buds to adjust (Cording, 2016). Choose one or two items each week that you can replace with a low-sugar option.

we gradually shift, we will learn to enjoy whole foods with more vitamins and minerals and

will be satisfied with only eating “treats” once in a while. Table 3 shows some recommended shifts (HHS & USDA, 2015c; Cording, 2016).



Table 3

Ways to Shift Toward Healthier, Lower-sugar Foods

Instead of eating these foods	Try these foods
Fruit snacks and sweetened fruit juices	Whole fruit and 100% fruit juice
Sugar-sweetened beverages	Water, low-fat dairy, or unsweetened tea
Dairy products with higher sugar content such as ice cream and flavored yogurt	Low-fat dairy products
Processed, packaged food	Homemade food with lower, controlled amounts of added sugar

These shifts begin with a change in the food you buy and where you purchase it.

- Purchase more food at grocery stores and farmer’s markets rather than restaurants, vending machines, and convenience stores. At the grocery store, whole foods such as milk, meat, and fresh fruits and vegetables are found around the perimeter of the store, so shop there first. Since these items are unprocessed, they will not contain any added sugar.
- Scan the labels for phrases like “sugar free” or “no sugar added” when buying processed foods, and check the nutrition facts panels for items with less added sugar. For example, different pineapple products, such as dried, canned, fresh, or frozen will have different amounts of added sugar.
- Look for ways to satisfy your cravings with whole foods when buying instant food items and snacks.
- Skip the processed food altogether when circumstances allow, and make your own pasta sauces, muffins, granola, pies, and other goods from scratch so you have complete control of the ingredients and the amount of added sugar.

Conclusion

The causes of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are complicated. Reducing added sugar intake is one of many shifts that could help prevent these diseases. Added sugars means any

variety of sugar product added to a food, and to improve health, limit added sugars because they often increase the calorie content but do not increase the amount of important nutrients. Reducing added sugar intake can help by decreasing calorie consumption and replacing added sugar calories with nutrient-dense foods that will positively affect your health. A few small, gradual changes will set you on the right path to a healthier you.

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