

THE SCOOP ON SUGAR

Are you confused about the effects of sugar on your health? Read on for the sweet facts.

Sugar Basics

Sugar is a carbohydrate. Carbohydrates, which include both sugars and starches, are the body's main source of energy. Some forms of sugar are found naturally in foods. Other sugars are added to foods for taste or texture, or to perform important functions during processing or baking. Examples of sugar include lactose, the natural sugar in milk; fructose, the sugar in fruit and honey; and sucrose, table sugar. The new dietary guidelines advise that added sugars comprise no more than 10% of total calories.

Check the ingredient list on food labels and you'll find all kinds of sweeteners. Words that end in "ose" are sugar. Sweeteners that contain sugar include high fructose corn syrup, corn sweeteners, molasses and fruit juice concentrate.

Starches, or complex carbohydrates, are made of many sugar units. During digestion, carbohydrates are broken down to the simplest forms of sugar and carried through the bloodstream to your cells for energy. As blood sugar (glucose) levels rise after eating carbohydrates, a hormone called insulin is released to bring blood sugar levels back to normal. Extra glucose may get stored in the muscles or liver. If you consume more calories than your body needs, some of the extra glucose may be converted to fat.

It's best to get most of your energy from complex carbohydrates rather than from simple sugars. Foods rich in complex carbohydrates will likely have more vitamins, minerals and fiber, and less fat than foods high in sugar. They include bread, cereal, pasta, rice, beans, potatoes and vegetables.

Sugar and Your Health

Sugar is often associated with certain health problems. Here's the real scoop on sugar and health.

Obesity

Consuming too many calories from any source, not just from sugary foods, can put on extra pounds of body fat. However, heavily sweetened foods are often high in fat and calories, and this tasty sugar-fat combination may set the stage for overeating.

Diabetes

Eating sugar does not cause diabetes. However, people with diabetes can better manage their blood sugar levels by keeping their carbohydrate intake under control.

Heart Disease

Being overweight and eating a high-fat diet increases the risk of heart disease. In some people, a high sugar diet raises blood triglyceride levels, which may increase the risk of heart disease.

Tooth Decay

When the bacteria in your mouth mix with sugars and starches in food, they produce acids that eat away at your teeth and cause decay. Frequent snacking and long periods without brushing increase the chance of cavities.

For overall good health and nutrition, get most of your carbohydrates from starches, vegetables, fruit and milk.