



The secret life of sugar

By Donella Young, MD, North Basin Medical Clinics



I have a friend who says she likes to eat dessert first, because life's uncertain. One thing is for certain in this life, you can have your dessert. Here's the real scoop on sugar and how to get the most nutrition out of what is commonly considered the villain of the food pyramid.

First off, sugar, in moderation, can be part of a healthful diet. Surprised? Well, sugar makes foods taste good and it provides energy, which we all need. While we're at it, let's dispel a few other sugar myths...

- Sugar does not cause hyperactivity.
- Sugar does not cause hypoglycemia.
- Sugar does not cause diabetes.
- Sugar isn't addictive.
- Sugar won't make you fat, unless you eat too much of it.

Unfortunately, the good news stops there. Yes, too much sugar can cause weight gain and cavities, but sugar can be even more insidious still.

Because most of us like the taste of sugar, we tend to crave it and often choose sugary foods over more nutritious offerings such as vegetables. The problem is that sugar often provides only calories with no nutritional value. It increases calorie consumption which leads to weight gain and is linked to diabetes, heart disease and scientists believe even some cancers.

In fact, excessive sugar consumption can lower "good" HDL cholesterol levels and raise the "bad" blood fats called triglycerides. This is a trigger for heart disease. When sugar is heated with protein and fats (like in most baked products) it produces harmful compounds called advanced glycation end products (AGEs). AGEs are linked to blood vessel damage and circulatory system problems.

Food manufacturers know people like sugar. That's why they add sugar to many products, including soups, sauces, canned and packaged foods – even those that don't taste sweet. This is called "added sugar." In 1999, the average American consumed 158 pounds of added sugar baked into breads, snacks, soups or in foods we purchase at the grocery store.

Now sugar comes in many forms with many names. However, there isn't a lot of nutritional difference between brown, raw sugar, molasses, fructose, honey or table sugar. Remember, the problem lies not in the *type* of sugar, but in the *amount*. Read labels to make sure your favorite foods don't contain more added sugar than you think because it's disguised under a different name. Here are some **alternative names for sugar you might see on food labels: Dextrose, Maltose, Fructose, Lactose, any kind of syrup, concentrated fruit juice, honey, molasses, corn sweeteners or any variation of these names.**

And know that just because a label says "No Added Sugar" it doesn't make that item sugar-free. It simply means no sugars were added during processing. All kinds of foods including fruit, fruit juices, vegetables, milk and grain products contain sugars as natural components.

So how can you have your sweets and eat healthy too?

- Eat sweets only after foods with higher nutrition have been consumed.
- Read labels for added sugar. Know alternative names for sugar and avoid foods with too many sugars listed on one label.
- Avoid "white" foods such as white bread, cookies, cakes, crackers and pastries. These boost insulin production, raise triglycerides and lower "good" HDL cholesterol.
- Use artificial sweeteners on occasion.
- Don't add sugar when cooking or eating at home.
- Sugar can fit into a healthy eating plan when used sparingly and after foods from other, more nutritious food groups, have been eaten. So eat dessert -- just eat it last and least.

Sources: Hope Health Letter, Journal of American Medical Assoc., Circulation magazine, American Diabetes Assn., and Eatright.org – website of the American Dietary Association.