

Sugar – friend or foe?

Sugar - The unlikely culprit

We are a society of sugar addicts. Let's face it, we truly are. The very essence of marketing drives us to consume sugar. The very act of eating sugar drives us to consume more. Basically most people are in sugar addict mode and don't even know it. Think about it for a moment. Be truly honest with yourself. How much sugar do you actually consume? Most people commonly consume sugar at every single meal and don't even realise it. They believe that they are eating well and find themselves getting caught in the nasty sugar web commonly experienced as 3 o'clock chocolate bar/cookie cravings or post dinner dessert necessity. Breaking the sugar cycle can be assisted with nutritional supplementation and dietary modifications, however, the simple fact remains that the more one consumes sugar, the more they will need it.

Sugar has absolutely no health benefits except it does give us an immediate short-term lift in energy levels. It completely lacks nutrients and interestingly will utilise circulating nutrients (namely B vitamins) for its eventual metabolism.

The typical sugar diary

The typical sugar diary looks similar to this:

1. Bad start to the day - 'Oops I skipped breakfast' or 'I'll just have a piece of white toast and jam as I run out the door'
2. Mid-morning hypoglycaemia - 'Yawn, yawn, I can't focus on work, I'll just have a coffee and a biscuit.'
3. No time for lunch - 'I'll just grab a sandwich or pasta' or 'Who has time for lunch?'
4. Afternoon crash - "I'll just snack on lollies, chewing gum, chocolate, biscuits, coffee to keep me going' or 'It's someone's birthday at work and I can't say no to the birthday cake'
5. Who can be bothered with dinner - 'I'm tired,, cranky and cannot be bothered cooking a healthy meal... I'll just order in or pop a frozen meal in the microwave or eat some cheese on toast'
6. I'm so tired; I haven't slept a wink - 'Why can't I sleep? I'm so tired?'
7. And again it starts the next day....

You're probably reading this thinking, 'Yep that's me. I have no willpower'. In actual fact, it may not be your willpower that is to blame here but your lack of nutritious food to keep you satiated throughout the day.

Sugar's many names

Whilst we are all familiar with the white powder known as sugar, there are certainly many other forms available. Most people think that brown sugar is a healthier choice than white sugar. Whilst it lacks the bleaching process white sugar undergoes, it will still have negative health effects. Technically, brown sugar is a sucrose sugar product with a distinctive brown colour due to the presence of molasses (another sugar). It is either an unrefined or partially refined soft sugar consisting of sugar crystals with some residual molasses content or produced by the addition of molasses to refined white sugar.

In addition to brown sugar varieties, sugar has many other friends. Some of its alternative names include: White sugar, castor sugar, icing sugar/mixture, glucose, dextrose, sucrose, fructose, polydextrose, maltose, galactose, mannose, lactose, syrup, modified carbohydrate, invert/raw/brown/cane/Demerara/Muscovado sugar, malt/malt extract, corn fructose/starch/sweetener/syrup, barley malt, beet sugar, blackstrap molasses, molasses; caramel, date sugar, dextrin, fruit fructose, grape sugar, grape sweetener, sucanat, turbinado; golden syrup, maple syrup, treacle...

Other natural sugar chemical compounds include: Brazzein, Curculin, Erythritol, Glycyrrhizin, Glycerol, Hydrogenated starch hydrolysates, Lactitol, Mabinlin, Maltitol, Mannitol, Miraculin, Monellin, Pentadin, Sorbitol, Stevia, Tagatose, Thaumatin, Xylitol

As you can see, clever marketing and food labelling enables most people to think that they aren't actually consuming sugar. In actual fact, these familiar ingredients will elicit similar bodily responses to sugar. Some may be *slightly* better for you but ultimately you're still consuming sugar!

Sugar's hiding places

Sugar, or one of its substitutes, can be easily found in many beverages and foods. We are all aware that the main sources of sugar are found in sweet foods such as cakes, biscuits, lollies, ice-cream, chocolate, carbonated beverages etc. These are the foods we know to limit in our diets and consider to be treat foods. It is interesting to note that there are many other foods and beverages that may not only act as a sugar when they are digested, they will also contain sugar (or one of its many synonyms) as an ingredient. What is most interesting is the actual quantity of sugar in these items. In some instances sugar may account for up to 40% of the ingredients! Some of the more unlikely sources include:

- Bottled fruit/vegetable juices
- Canned foods – Soup, Baked Beans, Noodles
- Canned fruit
- Crackers and savoury biscuits
- Mayonnaise
- Packeted foods such as '2 Minute noodles'
- Pickled foods such as pickles, gherkins
- Potato chips and corn chips
- Processed meats
- Salad dressing
- Sauces such as Tomato, Barbeque, Sweet and sour, Sweet chilli, Plum
- Sugared drinks such as Milo, Ovaltine, Horlicks
- Tinned vegetables such as beetroot or corn

Caffeine

Interestingly, studies have shown that caffeine will produce similar deleterious effects on a person's blood sugar levels similarly to sugar. As such, please be mindful that caffeine cravings may actually be a hidden sugar craving as well.

End note

Whilst I always promote a realistic model of health to my patients it never ceases to amaze me how reducing sugar will positively affect people's health in many ways. Some of the most common health benefits include improvements to energy levels, sleep, fitness, libido and intimacy levels, immunity, emotional and psychological health, mental clarity and memory, and general health & wellbeing.

Life is meant to be enjoyed and I recommend to patients to always remember to enjoy their food. As such, I promote the 85/15% rule. 85% for the body and 15% for the soul – Watch what you eat 85% of the time and give your body the fuel it needs to perform at its optimum so that for 15% of the time enjoy life and have that birthday cake. Certainly realistic!

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