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Sugar Blues

Like heroin, cocaine and caffeine, sugar is an addictive, destructive drug, yet we consume it daily in everything from cigarettes to bread.

-William Dufty, author of Sugar Blues.

The United States is the largest consumer of sweeteners and one of the largest global sugar importers. We started in 1689 when the first sugar refinery was built in New York City. Colonists soon began to sweeten their breakfast porridge with refined sugar, and within 10 years individual consumption had reached 4 pounds a year. The average American now consumes more than 100 pounds of sugar and sweeteners per year. In contrast, Americans consume an average of about 8 pounds of broccoli. The USDA recommends we get no more than 10 teaspoons per day, yet most Americans eat about 30 teaspoons per day—that's three times the liberal recommended daily value.

Humans love sweet things. Even before we started refining sugar, we sought out foods with sweet tastes. Sugar is a simple carbohydrate that occurs naturally in foods such as grains, beans, vegetables and fruit. When unprocessed, sugar contains a variety of vitamins, minerals, enzymes and proteins. When brown rice or other whole grains are cooked, chewed and digested, the natural carbohydrates break down uniformly into separate glucose molecules. These molecules enter the bloodstream, where they are burned smoothly and evenly, allowing your body to absorb all the good stuff.

Refined table sugar, also called sucrose, is very different. Extracted from either sugar cane or beets, it lacks vitamins, minerals and fiber, and thus requires extra effort from the body to digest. The body must deplete its own store of minerals and enzymes to absorb sucrose properly. Therefore, instead of providing the body with nutrition, it creates deficiency. It enters swiftly into the bloodstream and wreaks havoc on the blood sugar level, first pushing it sky-high—causing excitability, nervous tension and hyperactivity—and then dropping it extremely low—causing fatigue, depression, weariness and exhaustion. Health-conscious people are aware that their blood sugar levels fluctuate wildly on a sugar-induced high, but they often don't realize the emotional roller-coaster ride that accompanies this high. We feel happy and energetic for a while and then suddenly, unexplainably, we find ourselves arguing with a friend or lover.

Sugar qualifies as an addictive substance for two reasons:

1. Eating even a small amount creates a desire for more.
2. Suddenly quitting causes withdrawal symptoms such as headaches, mood swings, cravings for more sugar (preferably now) and fatigue.

Today, sugar is found in many of the usual suspects, like cakes, cookies and candy. But you will also find it in canned vegetables, baby food, cereals, peanut butter, bread and tomato sauce. It is often disguised in fancy language, labeled as corn syrup, dextrose, maltose, glucose or fructose. Even some so-called healthy foods contain sugar. A lemon poppy seed Clif Bar has 21 grams of sugar, or 5 teaspoons. Compare that to a chocolate-glazed cake donut from Dunkin' Donuts, which has 14 grams of sugar, or 3 teaspoons. You may think your afternoon cup of coffee only has a little sugar, but a 16-ounce Starbucks Frappuccino actually contains 44 grams of sugar, or 10 teaspoons—that's like eating three donuts! Overconsumption of refined sweets and added sugars found in everyday foods has led to an explosion of hypoglycemia, type 2 diabetes and many chronic, degenerative diseases.

Written by Joshua Rosenthal, Integrative Nutrition, 2008.