

CONFUSED ABOUT SUGAR ...?

What is sugar?

Sugar, like starch, is a carbohydrate. Sugar comes in many different forms but all types taste sweet. Sucrose, for example, is the common table sugar extracted from sugar cane and beets and is also added to drinks, baked goods and confectionery. Fructose is naturally found in fruit and honey, and lactose is naturally present in milk.

Glucose is one of the simplest forms of sugar. As well as being part of most other sugars (for example, sucrose is made of glucose and fructose) it is the basic building block of starch, the main form of carbohydrate found in bread, pasta, potatoes, rice, pulses, whole grains and cereals. Glucose is also the type of sugar that circulates in the blood, often referred to as 'blood sugar', and provides the body with energy.

Is sugar bad for you?

No, it's the amount, and how frequently you eat sugar that matters. Most people eat too much added sugar, for example, in sweets, cakes, biscuits, jams, sugary drinks, puddings, ice cream and packet sugar. If you consume too much sugar at the expense of other foods, your diet can be less nutritious, as foods and drinks rich in added sugars tend to be high in calories, but lower in other nutrients such as protein, vitamins, minerals and fibre.

People who have diabetes need to have knowledge not only on how much sugar there is in foods but how much carbohydrates (any form) the food contains. Take for an example a biscuit; this will contain flour (the starchy part), sugar and fats. If one consumes biscuits with no added sugar, a high consumption of those biscuits will still have an adverse effect on blood sugar levels. It is imperative that a dietitian evaluates your diet and calculates how much total carbohydrates are needed in your meals.

The only health problem directly linked to sugar is tooth decay. Bacteria in the mouth use sugars to produce tooth-damaging acid. Eating sugar frequently puts teeth at the greatest risk of decay. This is especially true for sugars that have been processed in some way, for example, fruit juice, honey or in foods and drinks containing added sugar rather than those that come naturally prepackaged in foods like fruit.

Does sugar make you fat?

Sugary foods and drinks can only make us gain weight if overall we eat more calories than we burn. Since sugary foods taste great and can be rich in calories (think chocolate, cakes, ice cream, biscuits, puddings), it could be easy to consume too many calories from sweet foods and drinks.

Sugary drinks need a special mention since research suggests they make it harder for people to regulate how much they eat overall, and a regular intake may be a factor contributing to obesity in children.

Does eating too much sugar cause diabetes?

No, diabetes is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. However, being overweight does increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. People with diabetes in the family are advised to enjoy a healthy diet and regular exercise to control their weight.

Is sugar addictive?

Studies have suggested it might be for rats, but research with humans is lacking. Sugar helps make food taste so good that, like many enjoyable things, it can stimulate the brain's pleasure centre to release "feel-good" chemicals called endorphins. So it's hardly surprising we like sweet foods - especially when combined with fat. Chocolate is the most craved of all foods! Describing ourselves as 'addicted to chocolate' can simply help us feel better about our strong desire for it.