

# SURROUNDED BY SUGAR

*By Luigi Gratton, M.P.H.*

I always encourage my patients, when shopping, to avoid sugar and instead, look for protein. Since we live in a carbohydrate-rich society, it's not always easy to find low-calorie, healthful foods, which are generally expensive and have a short shelf life. This is all too obvious when traveling. Whether it's the airport or a petrol station, high-protein foods that are low in sugar are difficult to find. The next time you walk into a petrol station, a food stop, or a snack bar in the airport, look around. You will see lots of crisps, sweets, crackers, doughnuts, muffins and plenty of fizzy drinks. Generally, the only food containing protein is pork scratchings, peanuts and milk. Now protein bars are coming into fashion, but they are not widespread. The problem with snacking on sugary foods is the empty calories. You want to make your calories count, and sugar doesn't help much. Prepackaged foods that are high in sugar generally do not have a high-nutrient density.

Protein is the nutrient of interest for most of the current diets. In the 1980s, the high-carbohydrate diet was king, but this diet has proven detrimental to most people. We do need carbohydrates – remember, it's like the fuel you add in the petrol tank of your car – but unless you're training for a marathon, you do not need that much. Generally, about 40 percent to 50 percent of your daily calories can come from carbohydrates, which means that on a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet, that is approximately 800 to 1,000 calories, which translates into the typical Western breakfast of a large latte and a muffin. Under these conditions, you're usually reached the level of carbohydrates you need for the day. Now imagine adding some pizza, a hamburger and a fizzy drink, a mid-afternoon coffee, a bag of crisps and then maybe some bread with dinner. It's not hard to quickly accumulate 4,000 calories. Cutting a significant portion of carbohydrates out of the diet is the basis of most, if not all, of the popular diet programmes today.

The idea of a low-fat diet has changed, and now a diet rich in healthy fats – such as monounsaturated fats from nuts, avocados and olive oil, and polyunsaturated fats from fish oil and flaxseed – is popular. The ideal percentage of dietary protein can vary widely, but most experts target around 30 percent.

# SUGAR HIDE-AND-SEEK

*By Susan Bowerman*

Say the word “sugar” and most people picture the familiar white granular stuff many of us have in a sugar bowl at home. But what is sugar exactly?

Table sugar is just one form of sugar that we get in the diet. Sugars are carbohydrates, and they exist naturally in different forms and in all kinds of foods. The granulated sugar that you might sprinkle on your cereal is called sucrose, which is produced primarily by extracting the sugar from sugar beets or sugar cane, although it is present in lots of other plant foods, too. The primary sugar in fruits is called fructose, and there is a naturally occurring sugar in milk called lactose. When you consume a fruit, a vegetable or a dairy product, you can’t avoid consuming the natural sugar that these foods contain.

All sugars ultimately end up in the bloodstream in the form of glucose, which is the form of sugar that our body prefers to use for energy. While sugars in foods end up as glucose in the bloodstream, so do the end-products of the digestion of all carbohydrate-rich foods like fruits, vegetables and starchy foods.

The concern about sugar intake from added sugars (not the naturally occurring ones) has mostly to do with the fact that they are considered to be “empty calories”—that is, sugar provides calories (which the body uses for energy) but no vitamins or minerals. So, if you consume a lot of sugary foods instead of healthier items, you are shortchanging yourself by not getting enough of the vitamins, minerals, fibre and phytonutrients that carbohydrate-rich natural foods contain.

We eat a lot of sugar—even in foods that don’t taste sweet. Aside from the obvious items like fizzy drinks, fruit drinks, sweetened cereals and desserts, sugar – in one form or another – finds its way into condiments, soups, breads and even savory snacks like crisps. The primary health hazard of eating too much sugar is tooth decay. The bacteria that live in your mouth can convert sugars into an acid that can destroy tooth enamel. Foods that are sweet and sticky, like fruit snacks or gummy sweets, are particularly a problem since the sugar stays in contact with the teeth.

Does sugar make you fat? Certainly, sugar adds extra calories to the diet, and extra calories mean extra weight. Most studies have focused on fizzy drink consumption, and several have concluded that as fizzy drink consumption increases, so does the risk of obesity. Part of the problem with these beverages is that they don’t fill us up—so we can consume a lot of calories in these sweet liquids and still consume regular solid foods, too, before we feel full.

## SECTION FIVE: Week 9: Sugar

The other issue is that many foods that are high in added sugars are also high in fats and calories – cakes, pastries, ice cream and chocolate bars are just some of the sweet foods we eat that are loaded down with fat and calories. Food manufacturers are more than happy to accommodate the consumer’s sweet tooth—sugar is inexpensive and adds a lot of taste to foods. To know how much sugar you are eating, it’s important to understand that many forms of sugar are added to foods. By reading the label, you may not realise how much sugar a food really contains.

Here are some other forms of sugar that you might see on a label: sucrose, fructose, glucose, dextrose, lactose, maltose, invert sugar, raw sugar, turbinado sugar, brown sugar, cane sugar, brown rice syrup, fruit juice concentrate, confectioner’s sugar, maltodextrin, corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, maple syrup and molasses.

When you look at a food label, the sugar content is listed – in grams per serving – just under the total carbohydrate listing. But this includes all sugars in the food including natural sugars, so it can be deceptive. For instance, a bran cereal with no added sugar but with raisins in it might look as high in sugar as a sugary cereal. But there is a big difference in the nutritional value of the two foods, since one might contain only the natural sugar from the fruit, while the other will contain all added sugar.

How can you reduce your sugar intake? Try to obtain your sugars naturally – which should be primarily from fresh, whole fruit.

- Fruit juices, even if they are 100 percent fruit juice, are all-natural sugar but they are very high in calories—it’s best to avoid drinks with high calories, including fruit juices, fizzy drinks, lemonade and other sweetened drinks. Learn to enjoy your iced tea for its natural flavour, rather than for the flavour of the sugar that you pour into the glass.
- Rather than adding syrup or honey to foods like waffles or pancakes, try topping them with sliced fresh fruit and a dollop of vanilla yogurt.
- Look for wholegrain cereals without added sugars, and top with sliced bananas, berries or other fruit that appeals to you. This applies to both cold cereals and hot. Porridge is delicious with some mashed banana stirred in for sweetness.
- Keep healthy snacks around, like whole fruits, cut vegetables, whole-grain crackers, low-fat yogurt and low-fat cheese, so you won’t be tempted to eat sweets instead.
- Instead of baked goods for desserts, try fresh fruit with a bit of chocolate syrup. One great trick is to take ripe bananas, peel and place them on a foil-lined tray in the freezer. Frozen bananas taste just like ice cream and will satisfy your sweet tooth for significantly fewer calories.
- If you add sugar to cereals, drinks and fruits routinely, try to gradually reduce the amount you use. You may not really know the true flavour of these foods because you have “masked” the flavour with sugar. Fresh fruits in season should be deliciously sweet – no added sugar necessary.