

Reduce Sugar Cravings

How to Avoid the Sugar Trap

Is brown sugar good for health?
Are Sugar substitute healthier?
Let's discuss sugar reduction
myths together!



Sugars are simple carbohydrates (mono- and di-saccharides) which provide energy (1g of sugars provides 4kcal). Excess calories from foods high in free sugars can contribute to **unhealthy weight gain and obesity, increasing the risk of diabetes and other non-communicable diseases.**

Free sugars include **mono- and di-saccharides** added to foods and beverages by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, and **sugars naturally present in honey, syrup, fruit juices and fruit juice concentrates.** Sugars are added to a variety of foods to create flavours or distinctive textures. Other than confectioneries like **candies and cakes**, some processed foods such as **energy bars, sauces, breakfast cereals, dried fruits and canned fruits**, etc. can contain a considerable amount of sugars. **Some low fat foods** like yoghurt products may contain more sugars than their original versions to give a better taste.

The World Health Organization (WHO) sets out guidelines which recommend the public to **reduce the intake of free sugars to less than 10% of total energy intake** for both adults and children, i.e. less than 50g of free sugars (about 10 teaspoons) per day for an adult having a daily 2000kcal diet.

Daily free sugar intake
< 50g (about 10 sugar cubes)*

*for an adult having a daily 2000kcal diet



The Sugar Trap in Beverages

Studies conducted by the Centre for Food Safety showed that one of the major sources of sugar intake in Hong Kong is beverages, including **soft drinks, tea-based beverages, fruit/vegetable juice drinks and energy drinks.** To identify if a drink has added sugars, check the ingredient list on the package first. All ingredients are listed in descending order by weight - the ingredient that weighs the most is listed first and the lowest weight ingredient listed last. Other than the word “sugar”, if any of the following names shows up on the ingredient list, you’ll know that the drink contains added sugars:

brown sugar

glucose/dextrose

fructose

fruit juice concentrate

high fructose corn syrup

honey

invert sugar

lactose

maltose

molasses

granulated sugar/sucrose

syrup



Even some products highlighted to have “no added sugars” may themselves contain a certain amount of sugars, such as fruit juice. So, if you want to find out the actual amount of sugars in your drink, you will have to **look at the nutrition label** on the package. The nutrient content is listed based on the “reference amount” of the drink, often expressed either as per 100ml or per serving. Look for the reference amount on the nutrition label first before checking the sugar content.

With a hectic pace of city life, many local people have fallen into a habit of often eating out which, however, hides a number of diet traps such as excessive intake of sugars, posing potential risks to health. When patronising restaurants or buying prepackaged foods, keep in mind the following tips on lowering sugar intake:

Pay attention to the ingredients in foods and choose foods low in fat, sugar and sodium as the foundation of a healthy diet

Ask for toasts or plain rolls/buns without butter, drinks without sugar or with less milk, sauces on the side or to be skipped, and pay attention to the fillings.

Have more natural foods but less processed products

Continue to enjoy foods with natural sugars like fruits and milk.
Eat less foods with sugars added such as soft drinks, juice drinks, candies, dried fruits, cakes, biscuits and chocolates, etc.

Beware of the portion size

When ordering or buying foods, beware of the portion size. If it exceeds the amount for personal consumption, consider sharing with others or ordering/buying fewer foods.

Read the nutrition label

Read the ingredient list and nutrition label of products and compare their sugar contents.

Choose products participating in the “Salt/Sugar” Label Scheme for Prepackaged Food Products

Choose more “low salt” and “low sugar” products.



Patronise EatSmart Restaurants (restaurant.eatsmart.gov.hk/eng/home.aspx)

Choose “3 low” dishes, i.e. dishes low in fat, sugar and salt for a healthy diet.



Are Certain Sugars Healthier?

There are sayings that brown sugar, dark brown sugar, honey and syrup are healthier than white sugar. In fact, **these sugars are all very similar in terms of nutrition**, i.e. 1g of sugars provides about 4kcal of energy with **very few other nutrients**. Our body metabolises processed sugars (e.g. white sugar), syrups and naturally occurring sugars in foods (e.g. honey) equally. Excess intake of sugars in any form will provide extra energy, so whether they be brown sugar, honey, syrup or white sugar, use them in moderation.



Sugar Substitutes – Friends or Foes?

The use of non-sugar sweeteners (or NSS, commonly known as sugar substitutes) has been expanding during the past few decades. Besides being used as table-top sweeteners, they are now common ingredients in a wide range of foods and beverages such as soft drinks, candies, chewing gum, yoghurts and desserts, etc.

NSS such as aspartame, acesulfame and sucralose, are low-calorie or calorie-free chemical substances widely used by the food industry to replace sugars to sweeten foods and drinks. Such food and beverage products with lower energy contents may seem appealing to weight watchers. For example, 1g of aspartame can replace 200g of sucrose, providing 4kcal of energy instead of 800kcal from sucrose.

However, there is also evidence that people using NSS may think they have less calorie intake and tend to consume more of other foods, hence the lost calories are replaced through other sources. Overstimulation of sugar receptors from frequent use of NSS may prevent people from associating sweetness with caloric intake. As a result, they **may crave for more sweets and gain weight**.

WHO recommends against the use of NSS to control body weight or reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases. This is based on the findings of a systematic review which suggest that use of NSS does not confer any long term benefit in reducing body fat in adults or children, and that there may be potential undesirable effects from long term use of NSS, such as an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mortality in adults. This conditional recommendation applies to all people except individuals with pre-existing diabetes. People should reduce the sweetness of the diet altogether, starting early in life, to improve their health.

Attention: Patients suffering from an inherited disease called **phenylketonuria (PKU)** should not consume aspartame because they cannot effectively break down the amino acid phenylalanine which then accumulates to a potentially harmful level, leading to serious brain damage. People who are sensitive to particular sweeteners are advised to check the ingredient list to identify their presence and avoid them.

Conclusion:

A better approach to healthy living is to choose foods and beverages with **less sugar, no sugar or no sweeteners added**. Consumers can refer to the food **labels** on prepackaged foods to make informed choices. Taking in less sugars and less sweeteners in our diet requires the joint efforts of the trade and the public. The food trade is encouraged to reduce the sweetness of foods by using less sugars and **less** sweeteners stepwise, so that the public can gradually adapt to a lighter **flavour** and eventually alter their dietary habits.