

SUGAR FIX

Healthy ways to satisfy your sweet desire

Got a sweet tooth? Blame it on Mother Nature. Babies are born with a preference for sweet tastes. Breast milk, rich in fat and other nutrients necessary for fueling an infant's rapid growth, is mildly sweet. (So is infant formula.) This desire doesn't end in early childhood.

Beyond enticing newborns to eat, sugar provides calories. Whether the sugar is from an apple or a candy bar, the body quickly converts it to glucose, a simple sugar found in the blood that helps energize your cells.

So why all the scorn for sugar? It could be the company it keeps. Most sweetened fare-cookies, cakes, and candy-is also high in fat and packed with calories that contribute to unhealthy weight gain. Even fat-free sugar-filled foods, such as jelly beans, provide little more than calories. Foods rich in natural sugars-including fruit and certain vegetables such as peas and corn-are better for you because they supply nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and fiber while satisfying your sweet tooth.

The World Health Organization suggests that healthy people limit added sugar intake to 10% of total daily calories. On a 2,000-calorie diet, that translates into a maximum 50 grams of added sugar a day (12 ounces of regular soda supplies 35 grams; one teaspoon of table sugar contains 4). Your sugar allowance includes the added sweeteners in processed foods that don't seem sweet, including bread and cereal. Knowing your sugar allotment helps with label reading. You'll find that the sugar content of processed foods is listed under "carbohydrate" in the food label's Nutrition Facts panel.

Once you cut back on the sweet stuff, you may be able to get by with even less. Try these strategies for giving sugar the slip:

Make your own. Skip store-bought flavored yogurts in favor of mixing 8 ounces of plain low-fat yogurt with fruit, a teaspoon of low-sugar fruit preserves, honey, or molasses.

Go Whole. Indulge in whole-grain graham crackers and fig bars instead of store-bought chocolate chip and cream-filled sandwich cookies.

Use less. Use one-quarter to one-third less sugar in quick bread and muffin recipes.

Make the switch. Consider substituting artificial sweeteners for some sugar, but don't go overboard. Baked goods and candy with the likes of aspartame and sucralose are not calorie-free.

Balancing healthy foods with a desire for sweets is challenging. Always try to choose nutritious ways to get your sugar fix.

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