

## Trick or Treat? The Truth About Sugar

by Vanessa R. Speers, M.Sc.

Halloween is here! It's the time of year when your kids come home with bags full of candy and treats from the neighborhood, and when the inner conflict begins. "Should I eat some of it?" If you're worried Halloween sweets will cause you to "fall off the wagon," read on to get tips on how to stay on your diet and exercise program and survive this sweet holiday!



### Sweet Facts about Sugar

Humans are born with an innate preference for the sweet taste in foods. Sugar is found naturally in milk, fruits, vegetables and grains, and is also added to many foods during processing. Sugar has been widely used for decades in cooking; preserving jams, and adding flavor and texture to various foods. Sugars are carbohydrates, the main source of energy for the body.

There are many types of sugars. The most familiar one is sucrose, which is made of two simple sugars, fructose and glucose. This is the type of sugar we use to sweeten hot beverages and foods. Other food sweeteners include corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, honey and inverted sugar (a result of a chemical breakdown of sucrose to make an equal mixture of glucose and fructose, which is available commercially only in liquid form). During digestion all these sugars break down into glucose units in the body, which is used to produce essential energy.

Many myths are related to sugar - some think that sugar causes diabetes, while others think it leads to obesity, or to hyperactivity in children. Have a look at the following to learn the facts about sugar.

#### Does sugar cause diabetes?

Research is not conclusive about the factors that lead to the development of diabetes, but researchers now know that sugar intake isn't one of them. Moderate amounts of sugar can be a part of a healthy, balanced diet. Even diabetics can enjoy sugar if they incorporate it wisely into their meal plan.

#### Does sugar make you gain weight?

Weight gain is a result of eating more than your body needs in order to maintain basic functions and sustain physical activity. If you eat candy and chocolate and see that you still remain within your calorie limits, it may be possible to avoid weight gain. But chances are you won't be getting all the nutrients you need. However, as with other foods, if your candy and sweet intake amount to more calories than your body burns, you will most likely gain weight.

#### Does sugar lead to hyperactivity in children?

Over the years, much research was conducted to try and figure the link between sugar and hyperactivity in children. All the studies had the same outcome -- sugar does not affect children's behavior negatively. It may be the excitement of a special party, the trick-or-treat feeling in the air or the child's overall environment which causes disruptive behavior.

#### Why Watch Your Sugar Intake?

Okay, so now you're probably wondering - if sugar doesn't lead to any of the disorders mentioned can I have my cake and eat it too? Well, probably not, and here again moderation is key.

#### High Energy - Low Nutrients

Foods high in sugar such as cookies, candies, and soft drinks are often low in nutritional value. So, if most of the calories you eat during the day come from these sweets, you will probably be lacking in vitamins, minerals and dietary fiber needed to maintain a healthy, more immune body.

#### Though They're Sweet, Calories Still Count!

Sugars just like starches and other carbohydrates provide us with four calories per gram. Although other carbohydrates such as whole wheat bread contain the same amount of calories per gram, they provide us with more nutrients such as dietary fiber. Fiber contributes to a sense of satiety, and may even help us eat less and prevent weight gain.

### Tooth Bacteria's Favorite Delight

Bacteria are natural inhabitants of our bodies and just love it when we eat candies, sweets and soft drinks. Why? Because a mouthful of sugar will help bacteria grow, causing cavities in our teeth and possible damage to our gums. The bacteria use the sugar from the foods we eat to produce acids. These acids can destroy the enamel or hard external surface of the tooth, which ultimately leads to tooth decay.



Other than the direct effect of sugar on the tooth's enamel, a diet that is high in sugar and low in other nutrients such as vitamins and minerals may lead to an accelerated rate of gum deterioration and decay formation. Other than consuming healthful foods for your teeth, it is also recommended to brush them twice a day and to regularly visit your dentist.

### The Sweet-Fat Combination

Many of the sweets we enjoy are also high fat, for example, cakes, cookies, and chocolates. These sweets are also high in saturated fat and cholesterol. This combination provides a large amount of calories.

In addition to leading to weight gain, excess fat intake is also known to cause health problems. Research shows a strong correlation between a diet that is high in fat and the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. Calories from fat should not exceed 35% of the total caloric intake per day. The upper limit for saturated fat should be 10% of the total calories.

Even though chocolate contains stearic acid, a saturated fat found in cocoa butter that has been shown to have a neutral effect on blood cholesterol levels, it only makes up 35% of the fat in cocoa butter. You'll still be consuming lots of artery-clogging fat, especially from the partially hydrogenated oils in the candy bars.

### Tricks to Treat Yourself to a Happy and Healthy Halloween

This Halloween and afterwards, don't deprive yourself of your favorite treats. Eat them in moderation. Below are some tips to help you get on your way!

- **Only buy your favorite treats.** Enjoy this holiday by indulging in small amounts of the best tasting sweets. In other words, enjoy the *quality*, not the *quantity*.
- **Make a plan.** Plan ahead and decide in advance what and how many sweets you're going to eat this holiday. You may need to skip a snack here and there to enjoy Halloween treats without putting on extra pounds.
- **Cut back on added sugar.** Try to reduce consumption of sugar by decreasing the amount of sugar you add to your coffee or tea, and to abstain from soft drinks. Try substituting these drinks with seltzer or plain water.
- **Check food labels.** Look for sugar and its equivalents, including sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, corn sugar, dextrose, glucose, fructose, maltose, honey and molasses. Avoid products where sugars are high on the ingredient list.
- **Look for alternatives.** Satisfying a sweet tooth doesn't have to mean indulging in candy. Healthier alternatives include low-fat fruit yogurt, a parfait of fresh fruits and nonfat yogurt, a fruit smoothie or homemade low-fat, high fiber cookies and muffins.

To enjoy sweets and stay on track with your dietary goals, put this list on your refrigerator to help you make smart choices for snacks that are lower in calories and fat.