



DAY 06 - SUGAR CHALLENGE

LIVE THE FLOURISHING LIFE: FLOURISHING FITNESS

Sugar is a normal part of a balanced diet. It's found in fruits, vegetables, grains and dairy. But the huge amounts of added sugar common in Western diets can easily lead you to consume far more than is healthy. The kinds of sugar most often added to processed foods have also been associated with poor health outcomes when consumed in large amounts, and added sugars lack the nutrients that come with naturally occurring ones. That's why today's challenge is to avoid any added sugar in your diet.

ARE SOME KINDS OF SUGAR BAD FOR ME?

You might have heard dieters talk about "good" and "bad" sugars. While some sugars are better for your body than others, the harmful effects of any kind of sugar are only observed when eaten in large amounts. That being said, it's helpful to understand what different kinds of sugars could do to your body so that you can make informed food choices.

Intrinsic sugars

The sugars naturally found in whole foods are "intrinsic" sugars and include all kinds of sugars which your body uses differently. Glucose is one of your main sources of energy and all sugars are converted to glucose for this purpose. Fructose helps process carbohydrates and can be beneficial for diabetics, as it raises blood sugar more slowly than glucose. Sucrose, or table sugar, is made of one glucose and one fructose molecule.

Fructose

No sugars are inherently bad for you, and they are good in moderate amounts. But in high amounts, sugars—especially fructose and sugar compounds containing it—have been associated with a variety of health conditions. It should be noted that these are only associations so far, and it remains to be proven whether high fructose intake itself causes these conditions.

One significant impact of fructose might be on your liver. It's the only organ which can convert fructose to glucose to be used for energy, so eating lots of fructose can cause it strain and damage. Other studies have connected fructose to an increased risk of developing heart disease, metabolic issues and type two diabetes.

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Fructose may also impact your weight by keeping you from feeling full after eating and increasing cravings for sugar, much more so than glucose.

Added sugars

The possible effects of fructose are most significant when it comes to added sugars, especially the commonly used sucrose and high-fructose corn syrup, because they are usually added in large amounts. So while you should watch out for added sugar, there's no need to stop eating fruit to avoid fructose—if you did, you would miss out on essential fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants which can reduce your risk of developing some cancers, type two diabetes and heart disease. The negative health effects of fructose are only observed in high amounts—more than you will often consume in a balanced diet including all kinds of foods, including added sugars in moderation.

It's also worth noting that, when it comes to added sugars, all are pretty much equal except in the case of high amounts of fructose. Less processed sugars such as honey and agave are often considered healthier because of the extra nutrients they provide. In reality, the nutritional difference is very small and these sugars are broken down into glucose in much the same way. Agave is particularly misleading—it is often considered healthier because of its lesser impact on blood sugar levels, but this is due to its 70-90% fructose content, making it possibly harmful in large amounts. All these sugars also have the same number of calories per gram. At the end of the day, it's best to limit your added sugars where you can and choose ones that are most satisfying and enjoyable to you when you have them.

HOW MUCH SUGAR SHOULD I HAVE?

The World Health Organisation recommends that no more than 10% of your calorie intake should come from "free" sugars, which include added sugars as well as honey, fruit juice and drinks fermented from fruit. While this definitely leaves room for some added sugar, over 45% of Australians consume more than the recommended amount. Sugary drinks, including juice, are the largest contributor to this statistic, and they have also been strongly associated with weight gain—this isn't surprising considering the exorbitant amount of sugar they contain. A glass of orange juice contains 5 teaspoons of sugar—the equivalent of 5-6 whole oranges—and a small soft drink contains 9 out of the recommended 12 teaspoons per day.

High-sugar diets

You probably know that high-sugar diets have been associated with several health conditions. It's true that people who consume high amounts of sugar may be at a greater risk of developing, and dying, from heart disease. High-sugar diets have also been linked to obesity, inflammation and high blood sugar, making them a risk factor for type two diabetes and even cancer. But the potential

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dangers of a high-sugar diet are often disputed. There is evidence that these risks are most pronounced when a diet high in sugar is also high in calories. It may be that consuming high amounts of sugar increases your likelihood of eating an excess of calories but doesn't necessarily itself create health risks. It's possible that the relationship between sugar and disease is only one of correlation, not causation.

Eliminating added sugar

It's also worth considering that impact that strictly eliminating added sugar could have on your mental health. Some studies have associated a high-sugar diet with a greater risk of developing a mental health disorder. However, there may be a far greater risk in labelling certain foods as "bad"—it can cause stress, anxiety, depression, social isolation or even lead to an eating disorder. Orthorexia, the excessive preoccupation with eating healthy food, is becoming increasingly recognised by health professionals and may impact up to 7% of the population. As dietitian Renee McGregor stated,

"I never say anything is off-limits. I'll say a food has no nutritional value. But sometimes foods have other values."

So how much sugar can you have? Do you need to cut out added sugars altogether? Probably not. On one hand, you don't need added sugars and, if you're having a lot, they might be harming you. Less sugar is generally better. A varied diet of mainly whole, unprocessed foods will provide enough glucose. If you do happen to be deficient, your body can use stored glucose for energy and can even create it from other fuel sources if needed. On the other hand, there's no need to cut added sugar out of your diet completely. There's little evidence to suggest that consuming significantly less than 10% of your calories from free sugars has much additional benefit, and it could impact your mental health.

For today's challenge, try cutting out added sugar just for a day to see how much you're really eating. Then consider which changes might be sustainable for you—maybe reducing how often you eat foods high in added sugar or your portion sizes, cutting back on sugary drinks or cooking from scratch more often.