

## **Is there room for sugar in your diet?**

---

We're hardwired to seek out and enjoy sweet foods. At the same time, sugar has been branded public enemy number one. What to do? Should you prepare to quit, or is hitting the sweet spot every now and then okay?

### **What does WHO say?**

The World Health Organisation recommends that we all cut down on sugar. Sugar is energy dense and nutrient poor, and quickly increases your calorie load. Sugar laden foods can take up space in our diets that would be better filled with nutritious foods – fruit, vegetables, nuts, fish and wholegrains. And there's ample evidence that excessive sugar leads to dental decay.

### **So how much is enough?**

The guidelines suggest we reduce our intake of free sugars to below ten per cent of total energy intake. That equates to a **maximum** around 54g or **13 teaspoons of sugar per day** for the average adult, more if you're active, a growing teenager, or recovering from significant illness, and less for younger children, most women, and anyone who is sedentary.

### **And what are 'free sugars'?**

These are all sugars added to foods, plus some naturally occurring concentrated sugars and syrups such as honey, syrups (agave, rice malt, maple syrup), fruit juice and fruit juice concentrates. It does not include sugars naturally present in milk (lactose), whole fruit (fructose, glucose) and vegetables (fructose, sucrose,) as these are considered okay to consume in any amount.

Unfortunately it's impossible to work out how much free sugar you're actually eating by reading the nutrition label, because 'sugars' will include naturally occurring sugar such as lactose and dried fruit, as well as added sugar. Read the label of milk, for instance, and you'll notice that 5 per cent is sugar – that's the lactose.

### **Is sugar as dangerous as we're led to believe?**

Sugar is not uniquely fattening, addictive or toxic, in the amounts recommended by the WHO. But it's easy to over consume and get above these levels, particularly when consumed in liquid form, as in soft drinks and fruit juices. A 600ml bottle of Coke, for example, contains 16 teaspoons of sugar, which takes you over your entire daily limit. There is concern that in large amounts, the fructose component of sugar can cause fatty liver disease and insulin resistance.

### **So should I avoid all sugar?**

Sugar is added to many food items, so it pays to read labels. But that doesn't mean you should shun all foods with added sugar. First ask yourself **what food is delivering the sugar?** If it's yoghurt, then you're also getting calcium, potassium, magnesium and vitamin B12. If it's baked beans, then you're also getting a source of protein, soluble and insoluble fibre, B vitamins, folate, calcium, phosphorus, zinc and magnesium. The added sugar may be a small price to pay for a nutritious food.