

Kimberly A. Searl
www.mindbodybalance.com



What is it about the holidays and sugar? Decorated cookies, homemade candy, pumpkin pie—without sweets and treats, the festive season would hardly seem complete. But should you be worried about all that sugar in your diet?

The answer is yes—and no. Most nutritional experts agree that indulging in holiday treats need not be a serious concern, as long as your indulgences are moderate. After all, the holidays are a special time of year.

However, overconsumption of sugar year-round is a growing problem. According to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Americans eat 20 percent more sugar now than they did in 1986. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) says the average American consumes 20 teaspoons of added sugar a day (added sugar doesn't include the naturally occurring sugars in milk and fruit); that's equivalent to about 16 to 20 percent of total calorie intake! This may seem hard to believe, but many two-ounce candy bars, 12-ounce sodas and one-cup servings of ice cream contain 10 or more teaspoons of added sugar. The USDA recommends adults get no more than 6 to 10 percent of their daily calories from sugar (about 6 teaspoons per 1,600 calories).

If you're getting too many of your daily calories from sugar, you will have a hard time getting enough of the nutrients you need for a healthy, balanced diet, says nutritionist Debra A. Wein, MS, RD. Research has shown that people who eat all the recommended servings of food eat the least sugar.

How can you moderate your sugar intake? Here are some tips from nutritionists:

1. Be Wary of Soda. Soda contributes more sugar to our diets than any other food. Some fruit drinks and canned teas are also high in sugar content, with 20 to 30 grams per one-cup serving.

2. Eat Foods That Provide Long-Lasting Energy. While high-sugar foods on an empty stomach may give you a quick burst of energy, it won't last. Complex carbohydrates, such as fruits, vegetables and whole grains, will give you energy that can stand the test of time.

3. Be Careful With Nonfat Foods. You may be substituting high sugar for fat—not the best trade-off. For example, some servings of low-fat or nonfat ice cream have 40 or more grams of sugar per one-cup serving.

4. Have Your Triglycerides and Cholesterol Checked.

This is one way to determine if you're insulin resistant, which may make sugar more dangerous for you. Although there is no evidence that sugar consumption causes the body to store more fat (as some diet plans have claimed), excessive amounts of sugar may boost blood triglycerides and insulin levels more than other carbohydrates do in insulin-resistant individuals. This phenomenon can increase the risk of diabetes or heart disease. Being overweight and/or inactive increases the likelihood of insulin resistance, although genetics also plays a major role.

5. Eat Plant-Based, Not Processed, Foods. You can greatly decrease your intake of added sugars by eating fruits, vegetables and grains rather than packaged convenience foods.

6. Watch Your High-Fat, High-Sugar Intake. Some researchers believe that certain people (more often women) actually crave high-fat, high-sugar foods, such as ice cream, chocolate and other rich sweets. This craving may be linked to endorphins, but the relationship has not been studied conclusively. Foods high in fat and sugar are generally also high in calories and can contribute significantly to weight gain.

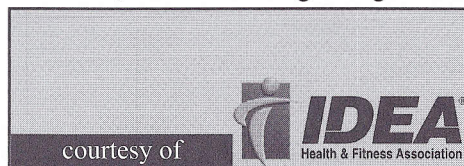
7. Practice Portion Control. Increasingly, large dessert and pastry portions are part of the problem. Opt to split a slice of cheesecake or eat just the top of your chocolate muffin.

8. Focus on Eating the Right Stuff. Your sugar craving may indicate you're not getting enough nutrients. Eat all the recommended servings of fruits, vegetables, grains and protein and you may be less likely to supplement your diet with sugar.

9. Eat Healthy Minimeals Throughout the Day. These will help keep your blood sugar stable so you don't find yourself desperately reaching for a sugar lift.

10. Don't Make Sugar the Bad Guy. If you restrict yourself from eating *all* added sugar, you may foster a deprivation mentality that can trigger sugar binges. Take a moderate approach. We're born with a natural taste for sweetness, and a little sugar is good for the soul.

Sugar: Facts and Fiction



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