

Sweet Illusions

THE TRUTH ABOUT SUGAR CRAVINGS

Don't kid yourself: Whenever you need a shot of energy, whenever you seek a guilty pleasure, sugar always seems to do the trick. A sugar-based treat seems to get the blood flowing and makes you feel good.

But too much sugar doesn't do a body good. An excess of it—particularly “added” sugars—can lead to bad health. Numerous studies link high blood sugar to obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and dementia.

Of course, it's easy to overlook science when you want a slice of birthday cake—especially when it's your birthday. While most doctors wouldn't deny cake to a patient celebrating a milestone, many health experts concur that consistently exceeding the recommended daily allowance of sugar could shorten life expectancy—or, more simply put, lead to fewer birthdays.

“It's about all things in moderation,” says Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of the book series *Beat Sugar Addiction Now!* “Enjoy the chocolate cake because it's not supposed to be: ‘Here's another pleasure you should feel guilty about,’” he says. Rather, drop the guilt complex and use common sense by not going overboard with sugar. ▶▶▶

What Sugar Does to Your Body

A sugar craving is similar to the light on a car dashboard that indicates low engine oil, Dr. Teitelbaum says. The warning means any number of things in your body can be amiss, so instead of consuming more sugar, address the problem. Cravings can result from a simple urge to fight fatigue—with tired workers pounding energy drinks to make it through the day—to the more complex act of hoping to beat anxiety and depression, he says.

But those strategies backfire. Relying on energy drinks is like “slamming down the gas pedal without gas,” whereas proper nutrition, exercise, and rest will actually do the trick, Dr. Teitelbaum says. And studies—including a recent one from the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*—show a feedback pathway in the brain is affected by sugar and may make

some people under stress more hooked on the sweet stuff.

“Clearly sugar leads to an endorphin surge in the brain and it triggers the pleasure centers that say we want more,” says Jack Wolfson, MD, author of *The Paleo Cardiologist*. “When you take it in, your insulin level spikes to control your blood sugar, but when blood sugar drops, you’re kind of hypoglycemic and craving sugar again. That happens when you start your day with a big cup of coffee, even black. Eventually, you’ll search for something else to get a rush.”

Not everyone craves sugar, although we may think that, according to Caroline Cederquist, an MD who specializes in metabolism, nutrition, and weight management. “People say they like the pleasure of sugar. But there’s a difference between liking sugars and craving them. The people who crave

them have already had a full meal but still have an overwhelming desire to eat sugary foods,” she says.

Sometimes, a metabolism dysfunction will trigger a sugar craving, Dr. Cederquist says. The sugar can’t convert into the glucose that’s needed in our bodies, and we’ll thus want more sugar. People who have certain genetic predispositions can suffer from this at any age, but many men and women who sped through their early lives without a sugar problem will feel it at middle age, when metabolism slows and sugar doesn’t move to the cells, making the body store more fat and crave sugar.

What Possibly Can Replace Sugar?

There are two types of sugar: naturally occurring and added. Naturally occurring sugars are found in fruit and milk, for instance, while added

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sugars are those included during the production or preparation of food. Added sugars can include natural ones—white and brown sugars and honey—and chemically manufactured caloric sweeteners like high fructose corn syrup. The American Heart Association recommends that women consume no more than six teaspoons of sugar per day; for men, no more than nine teaspoons daily.

Dr. Cederquist recommends moving away from high-carb foods that stimulate sugar cravings: instant oatmeal, bagels, and waffles. Instead, try to include lean protein at every meal. Yogurt, mixed nuts, and string cheese also work well.

“When you eat meals that contain a regular amount of protein, and have lower fat and carbs, you can eliminate sugar cravings in a week,” Dr. Cederquist says. “You will crave sugar only

when you eat sugar.”

Dr. Wolfson believes that people should ideally aim for no added sugars, or as close to zero as possible. As the title of his book suggests, Dr. Wolfson advocates Paleo-nutrition for health, including a strong heart. He recommends seafood, eggs, avocados, nuts, and the occasional seasonal fruit. Our Paleolithic ancestors “didn’t chase after other animals to milk them for butter, yogurt, or ice cream,” he says.

He understands that a Paleolithic approach strains under the pressures of a twenty-first century lifestyle, so whenever he has a craving for something more, he reaches for sparkling water. “Especially in the summer, when after dinner it’s hot, and I’m thinking about something sweet. I’ll have a glass of that and sometimes mix in some herbal tea,” he says. **TFL**

SELECTED SOURCES “Excessive Sugar Consumption May Be a Difficult Habit to Break: A View from the Brain and Body” by Matthew S. Tryon et al., *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 4/16/15 ■ Personal communication: Caroline Cederquist; Jacob Teitelbaum; Jack Wolfson, 6/15 ■ “Prospective Associations and Population Impact of Sweet Beverage Intake and Type 2 Diabetes, and Effects of Substitutions with Alternative Beverages” by Laura O’Connor et al., *Diabetologia*, 3/6/15 ■ “Sugar 101,” American Heart Association, www.Heart.org, 11/19/14



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