

The Food Detective: On the Search for Sugar

By Suzanne Vita Palazzo, CHC, AADP, and Founder of Vitalink LLC.

Take sugar, for example. Who doesn't like sugar? It's sweet and tasty, and it's what makes treats like cookies and ice cream so delicious. But did you know that sugar is often hiding in other foods? Foods you might not even consider "sweet," such as breads, crackers and yogurts, are often loaded with sugar, which may mean we're giving our bodies too much sugar throughout the course of the day.

Why should you care about sugar? Well, for starters, it contains a lot of calories but delivers absolutely no nutrients, which means consumption of it can result in weight gain and even obesity. Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, too much sugar can negatively affect our energy level, mood and ability to concentrate. Every time you consume sugar it causes your blood sugar to spike, which then results in a consequential "crash."

Now, here's the tricky part: Sugar is not always listed as the word "sugar" on a product's ingredient list, so that's why you need to be a food detective and search for it yourself. What you want to look for are words ending in "ose," such as dextrose, glucose, and maltose, which indicate a sugar. It is important to note, however, that both fructose and lactose are natural sugars; fructose is found in fruit and lactose is found in milk.

Fortunately, cutting back on the amount of your sugar you eat doesn't have to be a chore, because all it takes is a few simple swaps to make a difference. One easy place to start is with the beverages you drink, as many sports drinks, energy drinks and juices are often loaded with the sweet stuff. Try considering these types of drinks as treats reserved for special occasions or for when you're heavily sweating when playing sports. If you already drink water throughout your day, drink more. If you don't drink water at all, start.

Just remember that any packaged product contains all the information you need to make a decision about whether or not it's good for your body. It's all right there on the label, ready for you to read.

FAQs about Sugar:

Q: How much sugar is too much? Are there any recommended guidelines? A: Unlike nutrients such as fat, carbohydrates and protein, there is no recommended daily allowance for sugar. Keep in mind that what you want to regulate are added sugars – those found in processed and packaged foods – not those naturally occurring in vegetables and fruit. A good rule of thumb is to eat no more than 32 grams of added sugar daily, which is not as high of a number as it sounds. Take a look at your box of cereal, for example. One serving of your breakfast staple may contain as many as 10 grams.

Q: What are some of the biggest food offenders when it comes to added sugars? A: In addition to the beverages listed above, some items to avoid include flavored yogurts,

cereals, and many granola and cereal bars. Also, many protein or energy bars are loaded with added sugar. Consider them a treat akin to a candy bar.

Q: In addition to the “ose” words, what are some other common terms for sugar? A: Syrups, such as corn syrup or malt syrup, also indicate the inclusion of sugar. Aspartame and saccharin are examples of “non-nutritive” or calorie-free sweeteners, which often have the same negative effects on the body as regular sugar.