

Prevention column

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Sugar: Is it really that bad?

Knowing what's true about sugar and what's false is important for our physical (and mental) health!

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By **Catherine Lefebvre**

Registered Dietitian and author of
Sucre: vérités et conséquences



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Sugar: Is it really that bad?

There's been lots of talk about sugar in recent years. Because it's in just about everything, and we consume a lot of it, sugar often gets the blame.

First of all, you need to know that the **overconsumption** of sugars applies particularly to **free sugars**. That means all sugars added by the manufacturer (which accounts for the most, by far), the cook and the consumer, as well as sugars that are naturally present in honey, maple or agave syrup and fruit juice or juice concentrates.

According to the most recent studies, consuming too much free sugars increases our risk of developing noncommunicable **chronic diseases**, such as **cardiovascular diseases** and **type 2 diabetes**. While free sugars are not the sole contributing factor for these diseases, their omnipresence in our diet is worrisome to many health experts.

Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends reducing our intake of free sugars to less than 10% of our total daily energy intake, which would be 50 g or 12½ tsp.

We should ideally reduce our intake of free sugars to below 5% of our total daily energy intake, which would be 25 g or 6 tsp. At first glance, this recommendation may seem unrealistic to most of us. Yet, when we're mindful of the place sugar holds in our diet, it becomes easier to identify it and give it less importance. The idea is not to eliminate sugar from our life, but just to reduce our intake! ■



Where's it hiding?

No surprise, free sugars are widely found in **sugar-sweetened beverages** (soft drinks, energy and sports drinks, flavoured water and coffee, and fruit juices). In addition to desserts, varying quantities are often hidden in ultra-processed foods we consume daily, such as breakfast cereal, sauces, condiments, flavoured yogurt...

Interesting fact: Teenagers are the greatest consumers of sugar-sweetened beverages in Canada. On average, young people between the ages of 14 and 18 drink 657 ml per day. The average consumption among children aged 9 to 13, and adults aged 19 to 30, is around a half litre (500 ml) per day.

Since a half litre of most sugar-sweetened beverages contains more than 50 g of sugar, all the evidence suggests that many of us exceed the WHO recommendation by a large margin. ■





YOU CAN REDUCE your sugar consumption without going crazy!

Avoiding consuming sugar-sweetened beverages on a daily basis still is the most effective way to considerably reduce your intake of free sugars. Just one can of pop contains about 40 g of free sugars. You'll make fast progress if you introduce this change!

What's more, it is not always easy to identify and know the actual free sugar content in foods. A much easier way to reduce our intake of free sugars is to more often choose less-processed base ingredients. This practice often goes hand-in-hand with cooking from scratch... as much as possible. (No need to worry about doing everything ourselves!)

Cooking is an excellent way to reduce our sugar and salt intake. You don't have to be a top chef to get a tasty reward. The simplest recipes are often the best. Cooking also allows us to have a healthier relationship with food, and it adds more enjoyment to the meal, especially when everyone is able to contribute in some way! ■

What about alcohol?

Some people look beyond sugar-sweetened beverages and wonder about the quantity of residual sugar in alcohol. **The residual sugar content of dry wines and spirits like gin and vodka is very low.**

Needless to say ice wines and ciders, which are more syrupy, contain more residual sugar than dry wines. It can be as much as 50 g per litre. But the serving size of these drinks is usually smaller.

The residual sugar content of ordinary beer is greater. It is generally around 12 g per 341-ml bottle. All things considered, if you are concerned about the residual sugar content of alcohol, remember that it is the alcohol content of these drinks that is associated with a greater health problem! ■



The downside of sweeteners

While they have no added calories, artificial sweeteners – synthetic substances with a sweet taste – maintain our desire for sugar. In light of the most recent studies on the subject, aspartame, sucralose and other sugar substitutes do not produce the desired effects with regard to weight loss and insulin resistance. More studies are being carried out to help us better understand the impact of regular consumption of sweeteners on our gut flora (the collection of microorganisms in our intestines). At any rate, the best solution is to change our intake of free sugars over the long term. ■