

Is sugar safe to eat?



It is perfectly ok to eat some sugar. It's all a matter of balance, avoiding excess and consuming foods and drinks primarily from the recommended core food groups. As long as you don't overdo it, sugar is not harmful and is safe to eat.

DID YOU KNOW?

That sugar is naturally present in many foods, including fruits (which contain mainly fructose) and vegetables. Sugar can be safely included in a balanced diet and active lifestyle.



Why do some people say sugar is 'toxic'?

When we think of something that's 'toxic', many of us will imagine a substance that's poisonous or even deadly. But do we think of sugar? For most of us, the answer will be 'no'.

Sugars are present in nature, and are made by plants during photosynthesis.

Sugar has been looked at by scientists a lot over the years. They have a long history of safe use in food and drink.

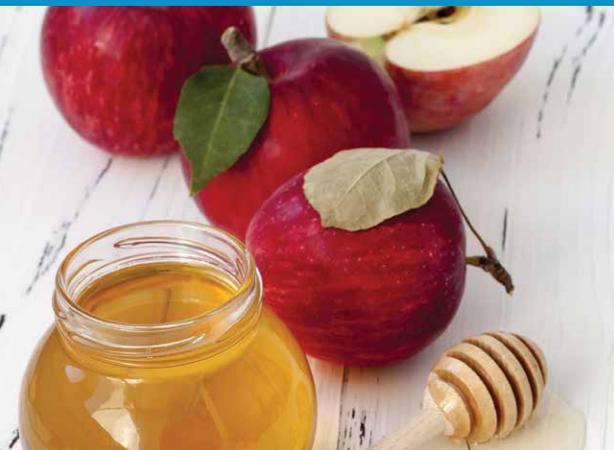


The fructose factor

The link between sugar and toxicity is often driven by studies on fructose.

Fructose is a type of sugar which together with glucose makes up sucrose, more commonly known as table sugar. Fructose is the naturally occurring sugar found in fruits, honey and some vegetables. Fructose is nearly twice as sweet and provides slightly less kilojoules per gram than sucrose.

Based on the way the body processes different sugars, concerns have been raised about high levels of fructose having a harmful effect on the liver, causing high cholesterol, obesity and insulin sensitivity resulting in diabetes. Studies show pure fructose in high amounts may have some of these negative effects. Weight gain may occur when more than 24 teaspoons of pure fructose is eaten on top of regular daily food and drink. However the reality is that we don't eat pure fructose and not in the large amounts used in these studies. Research suggests there is nothing unique about fructose and the main issue is too much energy intake. The dietary advice for added sugars still applies to fructose - eat sugar in moderation and monitor overall kilojoule intake.



Do we eat 'toxic' levels of sugar?

Is it reasonable to claim that too much sugar kills? Levels of sugar consumption in Australia and New Zealand have decreased since the mid-nineties. Recent data shows that our mean usual intake is almost in line with the World Health Organisation recommendation, i.e. to limit intake of free sugars to less than 10% of total energy intake. At the last look, this was at 10.9% of total energy intake from free sugars for Australia and 11.1% for New Zealand.

Eating too many kilojoules from whatever source – bread, apples, sweets, cheese – will lead to weight gain over time, and this may negatively impact our health. As such, we are encouraged to keep an eye on our overall kilojoule intake and limit the intake of food and drinks with added sugars.

What is high fructose corn syrup (HFCS)?

High fructose corn syrup is a sugar syrup derived from corn. It is used in the US, where corn is grown in abundance, however it is not commonly used or found in Australian or New Zealand food and beverages.

Despite the name, high fructose corn syrup is actually not high in fructose and is actually similar to table sugar.

100g Sucrose	=	50g fructose
		50g glucose

100g HFCS	=	55g fructose
		45g glucose

Going sugar-free?

Saying a sugar-free diet is necessary for health, and that foods containing sugar are toxic, is potentially risky. Sugar-free diets can result in cutting out fruit, vegetables, dairy, legumes and grains that could lead to nutritional deficiencies when taken to the extremes.

Any restrictive diet, whether it's sugar-free, fat-free, gluten-free (without medical reason), chemical-free, clean, paleo or vegan, has potential risks that dietitians warn about. These diets require unwavering adherence, which can lead to feelings of guilt if the routine is broken, or emotional overeating.

A diet that is truly sugar free is difficult to achieve. Celebrity diet trends recommend honey, maple syrup, rapadura, rice malt syrup, and panela as alternatives, without recognising that these are also sugars. Rather than quitting sugar completely, just focus on limiting intake and watching overall energy intake in line with dietary guidelines.



THE SHORT AND SWEET OF IT

1. Sugar has been highly researched over the years and studies conclude it remains safe to eat. It's all a matter of balance.
2. When it comes to food, unless you have a true allergy or intolerance, or the food has 'gone off', then it's probably ok to include in your diet in line with dietary guidelines.
3. Government guidelines tell us to limit food and drinks with added sugars and watch our overall kilojoule intake.
4. Consider the whole diet and have a food-based approach rather than just focusing on one nutrient. The key is to have a better overall dietary pattern.

For individual health advice see a qualified health professional.

Further Reading

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4. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian Health Survey: Consumption of Added Sugars, Australia 2011-12. April 2016.
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