

# Sugar – how much is too much?



*by Chris Mantle ANutr Senior Food & Health Development Worker*

Sugar is back in the headlines (again). This summer we've heard that the UK government has slashed the daily targets for how much sugar we can safely consume by half.

As many of us are aware Scotland and the UK are in the midst of obesity and diabetes epidemics. Scientists around the world now argue that it is our huge over-consumption of sugary foods and drinks which is making us fatter. Two thirds of adults are overweight in Scotland and almost one third of us are obese. More worrying still, a third of our children are overweight or obese and across Scotland 3,500 primary one pupils were obese in 2014.

Overweight and obesity can lead to diabetes type 2, heart disease, some cancers and a range of other conditions, including depression and sleep apnoea. They may also lead to an earlier death and mean that our last years of life be spent in increasingly poor health.

It is thought that this epidemic costs Scotland up to £4.6 billion each year and costs the UK 3% of its GDP. Other than weight gain sugar also causes tooth decay and may exacerbate mental health symptoms. But it's not just about the money. It's about our quality of life.

What exactly is sugar? Sugar is a type of simple carbohydrate and carbs, whether table sugar, pasta or wholemeal bread, are broken down in the body to give us glucose. Glucose provides us with energy for our muscles, for our brains, for life. Without it we wouldn't get very far. Despite the fad for low or zero carb diets, wholegrain complex carbohydrates (e.g. wholemeal bread or oats) are very good for us indeed,

supplying – as well as energy – lots of vitamins, minerals and heart and bowel healthy fibre. Sugar, however, is pure energy with no nutrition: it is "empty calories" and because it doesn't fill us up is very easy to over-consume.

There is only so much glucose our bodies can store and use. The problem here is that if we over-consume the excess is turned into fat and, as we know, fat stores can grow and grow, causing overweight and obesity. We humans have been hard-wired to go for sweet foods as in nature sweetness (ie ripe fruits) means foods are safe to eat and full of much needed nutrition. However, 'free sugar' like table sugar doesn't really exist in nature. In fact, our ancestors consumed very little; only honey. Even our grandparents consumed comparatively little sugar. As a result our bodies haven't evolved to be able to cope with it, especially not in the amounts we are eating or drinking today.

OK, so let's look at the new targets. The previous figures said that we should try to consume no more than 50 grams of sugar each day for a woman and 60g for a man. To get a rough idea of what that might look like a teaspoon holds roughly five grams. A 500ml bottle of pretty much any soft drink contains 52 grams. These limits were already fairly strict but now they're even tougher. Men, women and children 11 or over may now only have 30 grams of 'free sugar'. A single 330ml can of juice will now put us over the limit. We're surrounded by sugar in a myriad forms. Sugary foods and drinks are cheap and popular but they are seriously bad for our health and the health of those we love. Reducing what we consume is vital but how are we going to meet these targets?

There are a number of things we can do but first we'll cut straight to the painful chase: it's going to mean almost entirely cutting out sugary soft drinks (including fruit juice) and limiting sweets and chocolates to a once-a-week luxury. When we reduce or cut out sugar the first week or two can be tough. As our bodies are pretty much hooked on the

stuff they don't give it up without a grumble. However, the cravings quickly fade and we should experience both improved mood and be able to better tell when we are full, meaning any extra weight will start to come off. If we can make these healthy changes to our diet we won't regret it!

- Read food labels and go for those that have 'green' traffic lights for sugar
- Look at ingredients lists for all foods and beware that sugar has many names (eg fructose corn syrup, fruit concentrate, malt, dextrose, molasses, sucrose and more)
- Drink water, milk or herbal teas, not juice
- Always go for whole fruit rather than fruit juice or smoothies
- Increase the amount of fibre (wholemeal carbs) eaten – as this helps our bodies to deal with sugars
- Cook from scratch rather than using jars of sauces
- Beware flavoured and vitamin waters – they can be high in sugar
- Frappuccinos and flavoured coffees can also be very high
- Swap sugary breakfast cereals for Weetabix, Shredded Wheat, porridge or no-added-sugar muesli

What is 'free sugar'?

'Free sugars' are those which are added to foods plus those we find in fruit juices, honey, smoothies and syrups. This also of course includes table sugar. It doesn't, however, include the sugars in whole fruit or in milk – these are fine and not to be worried about!

The new sugar targets

4-6 years – 19g

7-10 – 24g

11 – adult – 30g

Submitted by [Christopher Mantle](#)