

Can you go 30 days without sugar?

Here's why you should

By DAVID LEONHARDT



Sugar, sugar, honey, honey.

It is in chicken stock, sliced cheese, bacon and smoked salmon, in mustard and salad dressing, in crackers and nearly every single brand of sandwich bread. It is all around us - in obvious ways and hidden ones - and it is utterly delicious.

It's sugar, in its many forms: powdered sugar, honey, corn syrup, you name it. The kind you eat matters less than people once thought, scientific research suggests, and the amount matters much more. Our national sugar habit is the driving force behind the diabetes and obesity epidemics and may be a contributing factor to cancer and Alzheimer's.

Like me, you've probably just finished a couple of weeks in which you have eaten a lot of tasty sugar. Don't feel too guilty about it. But if you feel a little guilty about it, I'd like to make a suggestion.

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Want to lose weight? You've been doing it all wrong

Choose a month this year - a full 30 days, starting now or later - and commit to eating no added sweeteners. Go cold turkey, for one month.

I have done so in each of the past two years, and it has led to permanent changes in my eating habits. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it. It reset my sugar-addled taste buds and opened my eyes to the many products that needlessly contain sugar. I now know which brands of chicken stock, bacon, smoked salmon, mustard and hot sauce contain added sugar and which do not.

I know that Triscuits and pita bread are our friends. They have only a few ingredients, and no sugar. Wheat Thins and most packaged sandwich breads, on the other hand, have an ingredient list that evokes high school chemistry class, including added sugars.

If you give up sugar for a month, you'll become part of a growing anti-sugar movement. Research increasingly indicates that an overabundance of simple carbohydrates, and sugar in particular, is the No. 1 problem in modern diets. An aggressive, well-financed campaign by the sugar industry masked this reality for years. Big Sugar instead placed the blame on fats - which seem, after all, as if they should cause obesity.

But fats tend to have more nutritional value than sugar, and sugar is far easier to overeat. Put it this way: Would you find it easier to eat two steaks or two pieces of cake?

Fortunately, the growing understanding of sugar's dangers has led to a backlash, both in politics and in our diets. Taxes on sweetened drinks - and soda is probably the most efficient delivery system for sugar - have recently passed in Chicago, Philadelphia, Oakland, San Francisco and Boulder, Colorado. Mexico and France have one as well, and Ireland and Britain soon will.

Even before the taxes, Americans were cutting back on sugar. Since 1999, per capita consumption of added sweeteners has fallen about 14 percent, according to the Agriculture Department.

Yet it needs to drop a lot more - another 40 percent or so - to return to a healthy level. "Most public authorities think everybody would be healthier eating less sugar," says Marion Nestle of NYU. "There is tons of evidence."

A good long-term limit for most adults is no more than 50 grams (or about 12 teaspoons) of added sugars per day, and closer to 25 is healthier. A single 16-ounce bottle of Coke has 52 grams.

You don't have to cut out sugar for a month to eat less of it, of course. But it can be difficult to reduce your consumption in scattered little ways. You can usually find an excuse to say yes to the plate of cookies at a friend's house or the candy jar during a meeting. Eliminating added sugar gives you a new

baseline and forces you to make changes. Once you do, you'll probably decide to keep some of your new habits.

My breakfasts, for example, have completely changed. Over the past few decades, typical breakfasts in this country have become "lower-fat versions of dessert," as Gary Taubes, author of a new book, "The Case Against Sugar," puts it.

Mine used to revolve around cereal and granola, which are almost always sweetened. Now I eat a combination of eggs, nuts, fruit, plain yogurt and some well-spiced vegetables. It feels decadent, yet it's actually healthier than a big bowl of granola.

How should you define sugar during your month? I recommend the definition used by Whole 30, a popular food regimen (which eliminates many things in addition to sugar). The sugar that occurs naturally in fruit, vegetables and dairy is allowed. "Nobody eats too much of those," Nestle says, "not with the fibre and vitamins and minerals they have."

But every single added sweetener is verboten. No sugar, no corn syrup, no maple syrup, no honey, no fancy-pants agave. Read every ingredient list, looking especially for words that end in "-ose." Don't trust the Nutrition Facts table next to the ingredient list, because "0 g" of sugar on that list really means "less than 0.5 g." Get comfortable asking questions in restaurants. And avoid the artificial sweeteners in diet sodas, too.

Part of the goal, remember, is to relearn how a diet that isn't dominated by sweeteners tastes. I've always liked fruit, but I was still pleasantly surprised by how delicious it was during the month. When I needed a midday treat, a Honeycrisp apple, a few Trader Joe's apricots or a snack bar that fit the no-sugar requirement saved me.

Finally, be careful not to violate the spirit of the month while sticking to the formal rules: Have only one small glass of juice a day, and eat very little with added fruit juices.

There were certainly times when I didn't enjoy the experience. I missed ice cream, chocolate squares, Chinese restaurants and cocktails. But I also knew that I'd get to enjoy them all again.

The unpleasant parts of a month without sugar are temporary, and they're tolerable. Some of the benefits continue long after the month is over. If you try it and your experience is anything like mine, I predict that your new normal will feel healthier and no less enjoyable than the old.

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