

Sugar basics – Key facts and links to information resources for children and parents

This section provides an overview of key information about sugar. It is information that we (health promoters, teachers, business owners and parents) need to know so that we in turn can help others in the community make healthier choices.

Sugar – frequently asked questions

Even though sugar is such an important issue, it's surprising how little most of us know about what it actually is, where it comes from, what it does to us and why too much of it is so bad for us. As we go about trying to help children and families consume less sugar, it can be useful to know a few facts about it. So, here's our no-nonsense guide to get started.

What is sugar?

The word 'sugar' refers to a range of sweet-flavoured substances that come from a variety of sources. Sugar can be found naturally in things like fruit, vegetables, honey and milk. However, what most of us think of as sugar – the white, powdery stuff – is actually made from sugarcane (a grass) or sugar beet (a vegetable). The grass or vegetable is boiled up and turned into a liquid before being processed and turned into a powder that leaves all the nutrients of the grass/vegetable behind and only the sugar remaining.

What happens if we eat the right amount of sugar?

When sugar enters the body it makes its way into the bloodstream, providing us with energy. In response the pancreas releases a substance called insulin into the bloodstream, which ensures that sugar is released in the right amounts, keeping us balanced yet full of energy. Eaten in the right amounts, sugar is not harmful.

What happens if we eat too much sugar?

The body goes into overdrive with sugar flooding the bloodstream, which is why we might feel a burst of energy just after eating sugar. In response the pancreas over-produces insulin, which is why sometimes after a burst of energy we might get what's sometimes called a 'sugar crash' - an unpleasant feeling of tiredness and irritation. This, in turn, means that we crave more sugar! Although it's worth noting that more sugar won't stop you feeling bad – try eating protein such as nuts or cheese instead!

Why is eating too much sugar bad for our health?

The body is unable to burn off excess sugar. Instead it stores it as fat, which can lead to people being overweight or obese, the consequences of which can be serious disease such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers. Too much sugar can also cause a build-up of acids in the mouth, which can cause tooth decay. Our bodies also have to draw on the nutrients from the rest of our diet to process the excess sugar, which can affect our immunity, leaving us more prone to bugs and colds.

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How much is too much sugar?

The recommended maximum daily allowances for children and adults are:

- 4-6 year olds: **5 sugar cubes** or **19g of sugar**
- 7-10 year olds: **6 sugar cubes** or **24g of sugar**
- 11+ year olds and adults: **7 sugar cubes** or **30g of sugar**



Are some sugars OK to eat?

Yes. There is no need to worry about the sugars found naturally in fruit, vegetables, plain milk and plain yoghurt as the health benefits from the other nutrients in these foods outweigh the damage caused by sugar.

Fruit juices and smoothies are a special case. When fruit is blended or juiced it releases the sugars, which increases the risk of tooth decay. They should be consumed at a maximum of 150ml (one glass) a day and only during mealtimes, which lessens the impact of the sugar on teeth.

Which sugars should be avoided?

The real danger comes from what's known as 'added sugar'. This means sugar, most commonly table sugar (the white, powdery stuff), honey and syrups, which is added to food and drinks while they are being made. Some foods in which you might find added sugar are fizzy drinks, chocolate, cake and ketchup. However, added sugar is lurking in all sorts of surprising places so we need to make sure we know how to spot it.

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Change4Life information resources

Change4Life has produced some great resources to summarise information about sugar for parents. This includes a [Sugar Swaps guide](#), [Sugar Swaps activity cards](#), [Sugar Facts leaflet](#) and a number of posters that can be downloaded or ordered from the Public Health England [Campaign Resource Centre](#).

Get Sugar Savvy

Children are eating and drinking three times more sugar than the recommended daily amount. The biggest source of sugar in kids' diets is sugary drinks, followed by sugary snacks.

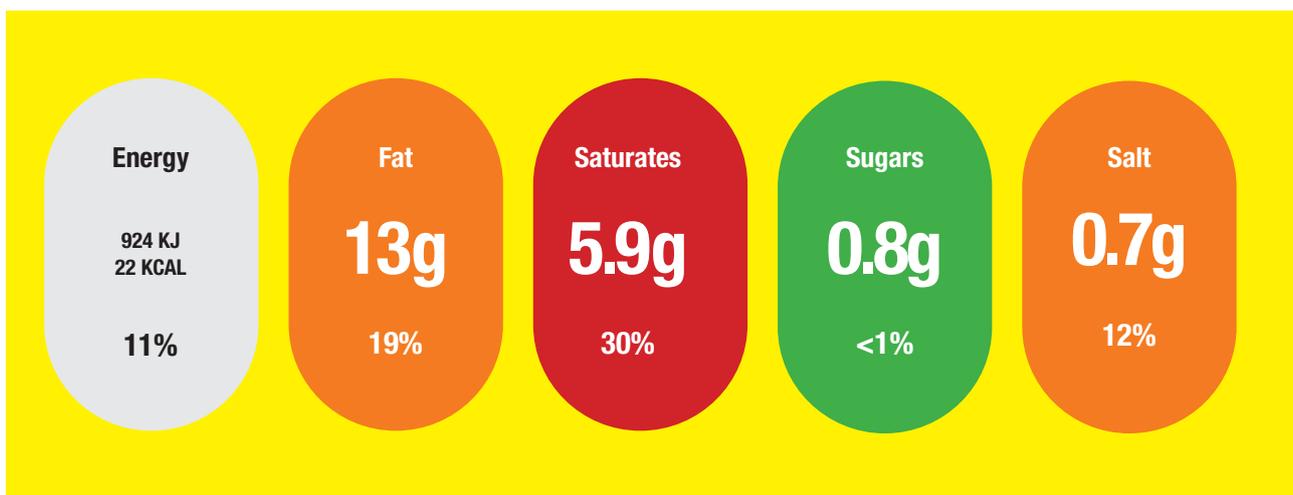
You might be surprised by how much sugar is in everyday food and drinks – a can of cola contains 9 sugar cubes – more than the maximum daily allowance!!

Change4Life has produced lots of information to help families get Sugar Smart. The key messages are summarised here. It is important that all of us who work with children and families are aware of this information so that we can in turn make sure we pass on the right messages (and learn some tips and tricks to try ourselves!).

Know your labels. It isn't always immediately obvious from the label if a food or drink has a lot of sugar in it but by learning a few simple rules it's possible to know what you're doing!

Rule no.1 – if the label says the food or drink has more than 22.5g or more of total sugar per 100g then it is HIGH in sugar. If it says it has 5g or less of total sugar per 100g then it is LOW in sugar. (Looking at content per 100g helps you to compare against different products)

Rule no.2 - Some packaging uses a colour-coded system that makes it easy to choose foods that are lower in sugar. Look for more “greens” and “ambers”, and fewer “reds”, in your shopping basket.



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Rule no.3 – Read the ingredients. The nearer to the top of the list sugar is, the more there is in the product. Beware! There are many different names for different types of added sugar. The most common are:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| ● corn sugar | ● agave syrup |
| ● dextrose | ● invert sugar |
| ● fructose | ● isoglucose |
| ● glucose | ● levulose |
| ● high-fructose glucose syrup | ● maltose |
| ● honey | ● molasses |
| ● maple syrup | ● sucrose |

The Change4Life Food Smart app is designed to show quickly and easily how much total sugar is in different food and drink products. Just scan the barcode to find out! Download the app for free from the App store or Google Play.

Get Sugar Swapping!

It's unrealistic to believe that we might be able to cut out all sugary foods and drinks in one go. Instead make small changes, for example cutting out sugar in tea or having sugary cereals less often. Below are the main times of the day when we eat and a list of a few key swaps that can be made to reduce how much sugar we consume....

Breakfast

Breakfast can be a surprisingly sugary meal of the day. In particular, we need to watch out for cereals that might seem healthy but can contain quite a lot of sugar.

Here are some breakfast foods that we might want to cut down on:

- High sugar cereal
- Sugar or honey as a topping for cereal or porridge
- White bread
- Toast and bread toppings such as jam and honey

And here are some breakfast foods that we might like to include more of:

- Low-sugar cereal such as wholewheat cereal biscuits or shredded wholegrain pillows or porridge
- Lower fat milk, ideally skimmed, if not, then semi-skimmed (fully skimmed milks are unsuitable for under-5s)
- Chopped fruit as a topping for cereal or porridge
- Wholegrain bread
- Toast and bread toppings such as avocado, mashed banana, soft cheese or eggs

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Lunch

It's important that we pick the right foods for lunch - to give us energy without the sugar!

Here are some lunch foods we might want to cut down on:

- White bread
- Chocolate
- Crisps
- Sugar-covered popcorn
- Cake
- Biscuits
- High-sugar baked beans
- High sugar ready-made soup
- Ketchup

Here are some lunch foods we might want to include more of:

- Wholegrain or multigrain bread
- Plain popcorn
- Fruit
- Rice cakes
- No added sugar jelly
- Plain yoghurt
- Malt loaf
- Pasta or lentil salad
- Homemade soup
- Salad

Dinner

When it comes to dinners, there are a few key rules to follow:

- Try to cut down on takeaways, ready meals and eating out. If you aren't cooking at home, watch out for dishes like sweet and sour dishes, chilli dishes and some curry sauces, which are typically high in sugar.
- Avoid stir-in sauces as these can often be high in sugar.
- Watch out for some shop-bought salads, which can have salad cream dressings that can be high in sugar.
- Avoid ketchup.
- Read your labels!

Desserts

Desserts are often very sugary and could be a place to really reduce our sugar consumption. Rather than list sugary desserts (there are too many to mention!), here are some Sugar Smart top tips:

- Replace sugary desserts with fresh, frozen or tinned fruit. Make sure tinned fruit is served in juice not syrup.
- Rice puddings and yoghurts can often come in low-sugar versions.
- Remember, children should have smaller portions than adults – this goes for desserts too.

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Snack time

Healthier snack options are those without added sugar, such as fruit (fresh, tinned or frozen), unsalted nuts, unsalted rice cakes, oatcakes, or homemade plain popcorn.

When shopping, look out for lower-sugar (and lower-fat) versions of your favourite snacks. Buy smaller packs, or skip the family bags and just go for the normal-sized one instead.

Here are some lower-calorie substitutes for popular snacks:

- cereal bars – despite their healthy image, many cereal bars can be high in sugar and fat. Look out for bars that are lower in sugar, fat and salt.
- biscuits – swap for oatcakes, oat biscuits, or unsalted rice cakes, which also provide fibre.
- cakes – swap for a plain currant bun, fruit scone, or malt loaf. If you add toppings or spreads, use them sparingly or choose lower-fat and lower-sugar varieties.
- Dried fruit, such as raisins, dates and apricots, is high in sugar and can be bad for your dental health because it sticks to your teeth. To prevent tooth decay, dried fruit is best enjoyed at mealtimes – as part of a dessert, for example – rather than as a snack.

Healthier alternatives to sweet snacks:

- Chunks of melon, strawberries, grapes, or whatever you have to hand. Look out for fruit that's in season, it's likely to be cheaper.
- Low fat fruit yoghurt.
- A handful of dry, reduced sugar cereal with a few raisins or sultanas.

Healthier savoury snack ideas:

- Baked crisps
- Small handful of unsalted mixed nuts
- Pumpkin and sunflower seeds
- Pitta and lower fat dips like salsa or reduced fat hummus
- Rice cakes with lower fat cream cheese and cucumber
- Celery sticks filled with lower fat cream cheese
- Homemade popcorn (without sugar or salt)
- Unsalted ricecakes, corncakes or oatcakes

Check out the Change4Life website for lots of tasty recipes for healthy snacks!
www.nhs.uk/change4life

Remember not to overdo the snacks though! As a rule of thumb children should have no more than a couple of healthy snacks each day between meal times.

If kids ask for more snacks after you think they've had enough they may be thirsty instead of hungry. Try offering them water or low fat milk (skimmed, semi-skimmed or 1%, as long as they are aged over five) instead.

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Drinks

Nearly a quarter of the added sugar in our diets comes from sugary drinks, such as fizzy drinks, sweetened juices, squashes, and cordials. A 500ml bottle of cola contains the equivalent of 17 cubes of sugar!

To be Sugar Smart when it comes to drink try to....

- Swap sugary drinks for water or lower fat milk
- Limit fruit juice to meal times and dilute it with water
- Reduce the number of fizzy drinks
- Cut back on sugar added to tea and coffee

Watch out for the sugar content in flavoured water drinks: a 500ml glass of some brands contains 15g of sugar, the equivalent of nearly four teaspoons of sugar!

Use a glass: Pour a healthier drink into a cup or glass and they may not notice it's different to the more sugary one they're used to.

Limit juices and smoothies: Fruit juices and smoothies are sugary but still count as one of your 5 A DAY. Limit to 150mls a day and have it with a meal because it can cause tooth decay.

Sparkling surprise: Instead of a fizzy drink, try sparkling water poured over ice, served with a wedge of lime or lemon. Add a couple of straws and it should go down refreshingly well!

The image shows a screenshot of the Change4Life website. At the top, the logo 'change 4 life' is visible, along with social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and a 'Join Change4Life' button. Below the logo, there are navigation tabs: 'Be Food Smart', 'Recipes', 'Eat well', 'Get going', 'Your child's weight', and 'Local activities'. The main content area features a large yellow banner for the 'Be Food Smart' app. The banner text reads: 'Get the NEW Be Food Smart app' and 'See how much sugar, sat fat and salt is really inside your food and drink.' Below this text are icons for the App Store and Google Play. To the right of the text is an image of a hand holding a smartphone displaying the app's interface, which shows a pyramid of sugar cubes and a box of 'SUGARY CEREAL'. Below the banner, there is a section titled 'Our kids are eating too much...' with three columns. Each column has an icon and text: 1. 'Sugar' with an icon of sugary cereals and a glass of juice, and text: 'Kids are having nearly three times more sugar than the recommended daily amount every day'. 2. 'Saturated fat' with an icon of chocolate and butter, and text: 'A quarter of children's saturated fat comes from unhealthy snacks'. 3. 'Salt' with an icon of crisps and a salt shaker, and text: 'Most of the salt we're eating each day is already in the food we buy'. There are also social media icons for Facebook and Twitter on the left side of the page.