DIET & WEIGHT

The Sugars That Matter Most

A clearer way to judge fruit, soda, syrups and sugar-free foods without treating every carbohydrate as the same thing.

The sweet thing isn't always the issue

You pick up a yogurt, turn it around and find sugar on the label. Later, an apple tastes just as sweet. By dinner, the pasta sauce has joined the list. It can begin to feel as if sugar is everywhere-and therefore every food containing it belongs in the same nutritional bucket.

It doesn't. Sugar occurs naturally in foods including fruit, vegetables and milk. Added sugars are put into foods during processing, sometimes for sweetness but also for texture or preservation. That means they can appear in obviously sweet foods such as candy and soda, as well as savory sauces, salad dressings and nut butters.

The useful distinction is not between foods that contain any sugar and foods that contain none. It is between a whole food that naturally contains sugar and a product carrying sugar that was added to it. That shift keeps an orange from being judged as if it were a soft drink simply because both contribute to "total sugars."

This matters because foods arrive as packages, not isolated molecules. Fruits and vegetables can supply fiber and other nutrients. Many foods high in added sugar can supply plenty of calories with little nutrition. The word "sugar" alone does not tell you which package you are getting.

Carbohydrate is bigger than sugar

Sugar is one form of carbohydrate, not a synonym for all carbohydrates. The other main forms are starch and fiber. Bread, cereal, pasta, potatoes, peas and corn contain starches: chains of simple sugars that your body must break down before using them for energy.

Most carbohydrates are ultimately broken down into glucose, the main energy source for your cells, tissues and organs. Glucose can be used immediately or stored in your liver and muscles for later. So the mere fact that a food becomes glucose does not make it nutritionally interchangeable with candy.

Fiber is the important exception. Your body cannot break down most fiber. Foods containing it can help you feel full, and higher-fiber diets may help with constipation while also helping lower

cholesterol and blood sugar. Fiber occurs in plant foods including fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds and whole grains.

This is why removing "carbs" wholesale can blur the question you were trying to answer. You may cut sweets, but you may also cut fiber-rich foods. Low-carbohydrate diets can limit fiber and may be difficult to maintain over time; anyone considering one should discuss it with a healthcare professional, particularly when health needs affect food choices.

A better first sorting question is simple: Is this a whole or fiber-rich food, or is it a product with substantial added sugar? That tells you more than whether the food technically contains carbohydrate.

The aim is not a sugar-free life.

Drinks carry the clearest warning

The strongest practical signal in the evidence concerns sugar-sweetened beverages. A 2023 umbrella review brought together 73 meta-analyses covering 83 health outcomes. Overall, high sugar consumption was more often harmful than beneficial, particularly for cardiometabolic health.

The review found moderate-quality evidence associating the highest versus lowest intake of sugar-sweetened beverages with increased body weight. It also found moderate-quality evidence linking added sugars with fat accumulating outside its usual storage sites. These were associations rather than a promise that one drink produces one outcome.

Some of the numerical findings rested on lower-quality evidence. Each additional weekly serving of a sugar-sweetened beverage was associated with a 4% higher risk of gout. An additional 250 milliliters a day was associated with a 17% higher risk of coronary heart disease and a 4% higher risk of death from any cause. The review also reported harmful associations across metabolic, cardiovascular, dental, liver and other outcomes.

Those figures deserve attention, but not false certainty. This was an umbrella review of existing meta-analyses, drawing on both randomized trials and observational research. Evidence quality varied by outcome, and an association cannot tell you that sugar alone caused every result.

Still, drinks offer a sensible place to look first. Regular soda is not the only source. Fruit drinks, sports and energy drinks, bottled coffee drinks and sweetened iced teas can also contain added sugars. For children, the general advice is particularly plain: offer water or milk rather than sugary fruit drinks and sodas.

A label can settle the argument

The front of a package may say "zero sugar," while the food itself remains highly processed and low in nutrients. A low-sugar claim is not a verdict on the whole product. The back label gives you more useful information.

Start by separating total sugars from added sugars. Total sugars combine those naturally present in the ingredients with those added during processing. If a product lists 20 grams of total sugar and 15 grams of added sugar, the remaining 5 grams are naturally occurring. The arithmetic is straightforward; the distinction is the point.

Then scan the ingredient list, which runs from the largest amount to the smallest. Sugar appearing near the beginning suggests that it is a substantial ingredient. It may be called cane sugar, corn syrup, rice syrup, molasses, caramel, honey or agave. Glucose, fructose, lactose, maltose, dextrose and sucrose are also sugars.

Added sugar can hide in ketchup, barbecue sauce, jarred pasta sauce, salad dressing, flavored milks, creamers, granola, instant oatmeal, breakfast cereal, canned fruit, jam, yogurt, protein bars and nut butters. You do not need to regard all of them with suspicion. You do need to know what you are buying.

Also look at fiber and the ingredient list for whole grains. Whole grains retain more nutrients and fiber than refined grains. A whole grain appearing among the first ingredients is a useful clue. This gives you a fuller picture than sugar alone: what was added, what remains, and what the food contributes with it.

Make next week less confusing

Sugar substitutes complicate the shelf further. Sweeteners such as sucralose, aspartame, saccharin and stevia have little or no effect on blood sugar and may help reduce calorie intake in the short term. They are generally considered safe in moderation, although their long-term effects are still being studied and some research links them with bloating and diarrhea.

That does not make a sugar-free packaged food equivalent to fruit, vegetables or other whole foods. Manufacturers may add other ingredients for texture and taste. "No sugar" answers one narrow question. It does not tell you whether a product is rich in fiber or nutrients.

If you have diabetes or prediabetes, this stops being merely an exercise in tidying up your pantry. What a food contains can affect your blood sugar, so understanding total and added sugars becomes part of managing a medical condition. Questions about how carbohydrates fit your health needs belong with your healthcare professional, not with a universal rule from a

package.

For everyone else, the next week can be refreshingly modest. Notice the drinks you reach for. Turn over one sauce, cereal or flavored dairy product you buy regularly. Compare added sugar, fiber and ingredients with a nearby alternative. Keep fruit in the fruit category.

You do not have to purge every favorite food because it contains added sugar. Portion size and frequency still matter, and moderation leaves room for pleasure. The aim is not a sugar-free life. It is to stop letting one word erase the difference between an apple, a bowl of beans and a bottle of soda.

Where this comes from

- Carbohydrates

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/carbohydrates.html
- Child Nutrition

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/childnutrition.html
- Spotting Hidden Sugars in Everyday Foods

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/healthy-eating/spotting-hidden-sugars-in-everyday-foods.html
- Read the Food Label Fact Sheet

  National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute · https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/resources/read-food-label-fact-sheet
- Dietary sugar consumption and health: umbrella review.

  BMJ (Clinical research ed.), 2023 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37019448/