

Do you really need to give up sugar?

Sugar detoxes are popular, especially after the festive season. But giving up sugar entirely may not be the best option for everyone and doesn't necessarily lead to a healthy diet.

Why give up sugar?

Abbie Overson Franke, 40, had never given much thought to the amount of sugar she was eating on a daily basis, until she started a course in nutrition.

"I learned the recommended range of sugars in our diets, and wanted to look at the amount that I was eating. It was an eye-opening experience, especially because I considered myself a healthy eater. I realised I would sometimes consume more sugar than what is advised," she says.

This realisation prompted her to try to reduce sugar intake in her diet, especially processed sugars. But she didn't want to give up natural sources of sweetness, such as fruit.

Overson Franke, who lives in Wisconsin, USA, is not alone when it comes to taking this decision. But although some people try to integrate this move into an overall healthy diet, like her, others choose to try and cut all sources of sugar from their diet or meals completely. People embarking on 'sugar detoxes' are all over our social media feeds at the moment. But is this a healthy approach?

What is sugar?

Sugar has been part of our diets for thousands of years, but it's easy to get confused. Are all forms of sugar bad? Does that mean we should be ditching fruit and bread too? And what exactly are we cutting out when we decide to give up sugar?

First of all, sugars are carbohydrates. The main function of carbs is to provide energy for the body. There are different types of sugars, including sucrose (extracted from sugar cane or beet and then added to our meals, but also naturally present in most fruits and vegetables), glucose and fructose (found in fruits, vegetables and honey), and lactose (in milk).

What's the difference between glucose and fructose?

Glucose, fructose and galactose are 'monosaccharide' sugars, the smallest units of sugar. Sucrose and lactose are 'disaccharide' sugars made up of two smaller monosaccharide sugars: glucose and fructose (sucrose) and glucose and galactose (lactose). Sucrose and galactose are broken down in the gut into monosaccharides, so they can be absorbed into the bloodstream.

"We make a difference between 'sugar' and 'free sugars'. The latter are added into our food during processing and cooking by chefs, manufacturers, or people cooking at home," UK-based nutritionist [Charlotte Stirling-Reed](#) explains.

How much sugar is safe to consume per day?

In the UK, specific sugar intake recommendations have been set: adults should get only [5% of their daily calories](#) from sugar-free (also referred to as 'added sugars') foods, which is the equivalent of roughly seven sugar cubes a day.

What happens if you eat too much sugar?

Most people are well aware that sugar is associated with a number of health problems when we eat too much of it. A recent report by [Public Health England](#) revealed that people in the UK are consuming almost three times the recommended daily amount. Eating too much sugar can lead to obesity and related health complications, including dental health and [type 2 diabetes](#).

"The data showed that, unsurprisingly, eating too much sugar can cause people to consume too many calories. It's easy to overeat when you are having sweet food like ice cream, because sugar is very palatable, and this leads to weight gain," Stirling-Reed explains.

Sugar is also [one of the main causes of tooth decay](#), especially in young children who have a tendency to consume excess sugar.

It makes sense then, that cutting back on sugar and foods that are high in sugar is a good idea for preventing the above conditions and adopting a healthier way of living.

Cutting down sugar, not cutting it out

It's often depicted as the source of all nutritional evils, but contrary to popular belief, sugar is not toxic in itself.

"It's not sugar alone that is causing cancer or heart disease or type 2 diabetes. The problem is the fact we eat too much of it, particularly free sugars. It's our diets as a whole that are problematic. To stay healthy, and avoid obesity and other health problems, we need to make more comprehensive diet changes than just giving up sugar," says Stirling-Reed.

In nature, sugar comes in foods that can be great for us, such as fruits, where sugar is found alongside an array of vitamins and [fibres](#). Getting a bit of sugar in your diet by eating those can be a positive thing.

It's also worth remembering that there is an important social aspect to eating, and cutting out a particular ingredient can be problematic.

"Eating should also be about pleasure and about sharing meals with others. Having this understanding of food can help people reconcile with the idea of eating, and can go a long way in making them adopt a healthy diet. Banning a specific food or ingredient like sugar can lead people to put it on a pedestal, and to wanting it even more," Stirling-Reed warns.

For most people, the best approach may not be about giving up sugar entirely, especially if the idea is just to do this for a short while, as a 'detox'. They may end up bingeing on sugar again when they go back to it. Cutting out suddenly may also be associated with unpleasant symptoms.

Although limited research has been done of the subject of [sugar addiction](#), anecdotal evidence suggests some people may notice [withdrawal symptoms when they quit sweet foods](#). Some studies have hinted at the possibility that some of these symptoms may resemble those experienced by individuals with opioid addiction when they quit drugs, including issues such as headaches, irritability, fatigue and weakness, light-headedness or muscle pains.

Overson Franke had to deal with some of these symptoms. Getting the help and support of a nutritionist or a dietician may thus be helpful in some cases.

How to give up sugar in a healthy way

Ditch the cube in your cuppa

An easy step to reduce the amount of sugar in your diet is cutting it out of your tea, coffee, or other hot drinks. Reducing the number of fizzy drinks you consume can also make a massive difference. Such approaches are much more sustainable than going 'cold turkey', and giving up sugar completely.

Read the label

[Reading labels](#) more carefully to know what you are buying is also helpful, to choose those products with a lower amount of added sugar.

Get fruity

Satisfy your sweet tooth with fruit, which contains fibre and vitamins along with sugar. Sugar in fruit also has the added advantage of being slowly absorbed into the body, because the food has to be broken down in the gut before it can be absorbed into the bloodstream. This means it causes slower, less dramatic spikes in blood glucose levels.

A better breakfast

Breakfast cereals are a big contributor to people's sugar consumption. Switching for healthier options, such as whole-wheat cereals or porridge, can be a good way to start reducing the amount of sugar in your diet.

PHE's [Change4Life website](#) has more tips for smart food swaps to help you reduce the amount of sugar you consume. These are aimed at kids, but are useful for everybody.

Overall, it's not about cutting out sugar completely but taking a more mindful approach to what you put in your body.

"A better approach may be to swap free sugars for foods that add natural sweetness and goodness in your food such as fruits and to think comprehensively about the changes you are making to your diet," Stirling-Reed concludes.

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