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Why do we get sugar withdrawal symptoms?

Cutting down on sugar has a lot of health benefits, including reducing your risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes. However, some people report unpleasant sugar withdrawal symptoms – such as headaches and tiredness when they try to eat fewer sugary foods. But why is this the case and how can you manage these side effects?

Why does giving up sugar cause withdrawal symptoms?

The symptoms of [sugar](#) withdrawal include [headaches](#), decreased [energy](#), an inability to concentrate and [mood](#) changes¹. Although it's not completely understood why these side effects happen, research shows it's likely linked to the impact sugar intake has on our brain chemistry.

Eating [sugar](#) triggers a release of different chemicals, including endorphins – which boost your mood and reduce pain – and dopamine, which is linked to pleasure, satisfaction and reward. Sugar stimulates the brain's reward system and ultimately, it makes us feel good – so we are likely to want to eat more sugary food and drinks.

These kinds of changes can lead to dependence and addiction². Therefore, giving [sugar](#) up may trigger unwanted side effects.

Symptoms of sugar withdrawal

Not everyone struggles when they cut back on sugary foods. In the long-term, it can make you feel good and improve your health. However, symptoms of sugar withdrawal can be both physical and mental. You may feel [tired](#), irritable and [anxious](#), or you may have [headaches](#) – but these issues are temporary.

Why can the keto diet cause sugar withdrawal symptoms?

Ketogenic diets involve cutting all sugars out of your diet, including natural sugars found in fruit. The aim of these high-fat, **low-carb diets** is to put the body into a state of ketosis, which is when the body burns fats instead of carbohydrates as its main fuel source³. Ketosis can have unpleasant symptoms similar to sugar withdrawal.

Reema Patel, dietitian at **Dietitian Fit & Co**, says the symptoms of ketosis are colloquially known as keto flu.

"Initially, these symptoms include headaches, **fatigue** and **nausea**, but again they will soon go away," she says. Being **dehydrated** can also mimic the sugar withdrawal symptoms, so it is important to make sure you keep well hydrated if you are cutting down on sugar.

"If you have a lack of sodium in the diet, you may also experience symptoms such as headache and low mood," says Patel.

How can you manage sugar withdrawal symptoms?

Set achievable goals

There may be health reasons to switch to a very low-sugar diet, but it can be easier to gradually reduce the amount of sugar you eat rather than cutting it out all at once.

Making small food swaps can be helpful. For example, switching sugary snacks for **foods** that are higher in proteins, fats and wholegrains. Swap sugary fizzy drinks and energy drinks with plain or sparkling water – adding some slices of lemon or lime can add flavour.

Eat enough fibre

"Be sure that you are consuming enough dietary **fibre**," says Patel. "This will help regulate blood sugar levels, reducing dips that can lead to cravings. Dietary **fibre** comes from vegetables, wholegrains, pulses, beans as well as nuts and seeds.

"It's also important to include a good mix of proteins, healthy fats and complex carbohydrates with meals to help keep you full and reduce cravings."

Exercise

[Exercise](#) can improve symptoms of reducing sugar, as [physical activity](#) releases endorphins which boost your mood and wellbeing.

Improve your sleep hygiene

Poor [sleep](#) has long been known to make us crave sugary and higher calorie foods⁴. Working on your [bedtime routine](#) - by avoiding screens before bed and creating a relaxing atmosphere - can help improve your sleep. If you're well-rested, you'll be less likely to give in to sugar cravings.

Further reading

1. Falbe et al: [Potentially addictive properties of sugar-sweetened beverages among adolescents.](#)
2. Avena et al: [Evidence for sugar addiction: Behavioural and neurochemical effects of intermittent, excessive sugar intake.](#)
3. Masood et al: [Ketogenic diets.](#)
4. Markwald et al: [Impact of insufficient sleep on total daily energy expenditure, food intake, and weight gain.](#)

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