

Sugar: How much is healthy for your child?

Sugars and starches are carbohydrates, a source of energy for the body that provides 50 to 60 percent of calories consumed by the average American. But, are some carbohydrates healthier than others? Can too much sugar in children's diets lead to health problems?

Types of dietary carbohydrates

There are two groups of carbohydrates (often called carbs). **Simple carbohydrates** are found in sugars such as fructose (fruit sugar), lactose (milk sugar), sucrose (table sugar), and glucose. **Complex carbohydrates** such as starch and fiber (non-digestible carbohydrates) are found in whole grains and vegetables.

Carbohydrates are absorbed in the small intestine, converted to glucose in the liver, and used for energy. Excess calories from eating too many carbohydrates or from consuming more calories than needed may be stored as body fat.

Can carbohydrates be good or bad?

Some carbohydrates are healthier than others. Sugar can be naturally present in foods such as fruits and milk. It also can be added to the food at the table or during processing and preparation in the form of ingredients such as high fructose corn syrup, which can be found in sweetened beverages and baked products.

Bad carbohydrates

Food groups that contain more than 5 percent added sugars (such as regular soft drinks, candy, cakes, cookies, pies, fruit punch, ice cream, sweetened yogurt and milk, cinnamon toast) are major sources of added sugar. Added sugar provides only empty calories—no minerals or vitamins.

Good carbohydrates

The good carbohydrates are those that not only provide a steady supply of energy, but also other nutrients the body needs. Whole-grain cereals, brown rice, whole-grain breads, fruits and vegetables are good sources of carbohydrates, fibers and other nutrients.

Problems caused by sugar

- Sugar contributes to dental caries. Bacteria break down carbohydrates in the mouth, forming acids which then dissolve the nearby tooth enamel.
- Excess use of processed carbohydrates (refined sugars found in foods and beverages like candy and soda, and refined grains like white rice and white flour, found in many pastas and breads) are major source of surplus calories, contributing to the dramatic rise of obesity. Consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks is also associated with the rising problem of obesity in children.
- Foods that contain a lot of simple sugars cause the blood sugar level to rise more quickly than others. Scientists have been studying whether eating foods that cause big jumps in blood sugar may be related to chronic health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

Myths and facts about sugar

Myth: Sugar is addictive.

Fact: Cutting back on sugar does not cause withdrawal symptoms, although it can cause a strong craving for sweets.

Myth: Sugar causes hyperactivity.

Fact: Actually, eating a large amount of carbohydrates may make you feel sleepy.

Tips to remember

- Maintaining a nutritious diet and a healthy weight is very important. Carbohydrates are good for health, if the right kind and right amount are used.
- Sugars should be used in moderation by most healthy people and sparingly by people with low calorie needs.
- Choose fiber-rich fruits, vegetables and whole grains often.
- Choose and prepare foods and beverages with little added sugars or caloric sweeteners.
- Reduce the incidence of dental caries by practicing good oral hygiene and consuming sugar- and starch-containing foods and beverages less frequently.
- Don't reward children with sweets.

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References and Resources

Dietary Guidelines for Americans (2005) at www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines.

United State Department of Agriculture at www.mypyramid.org.



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