

EAT WELL

ON A SUGAR LOW

THE THEME FOR DIETITIANS' DAY* IN SINGAPORE IS "TOWARDS LESS SUGARY BEVERAGES" — IT'S TIME YOU KNEW WHAT'S REALLY IN YOUR DRINK.

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WHEN IT comes to processed drinks, those who are more health-conscious would typically choose the ones with less or no sugar. Sugar, however, can be a hard habit to break. But being aware of how much sugar is in a drink, and how consuming too much of it may adversely affect health, can strengthen the resolve to cut down on sugary beverages.

The Singapore Health Promotion Board recommends that the total sugar consumption for an adult should be less than 10 per cent of his or her total energy requirement. For the average adult, says National Healthcare Group Polyclinics (NHGP) dietitian Chow Li Ming, the daily allowance for added sugar is about 40–55g (or 10 teaspoons a day). Drinking a 330ml can of regular Coca-Cola (which contains about nine teaspoons of sugar) would put you close to this daily limit.

Sugar and Diabetes

There are no health benefits to consuming sugar. Sugar contains empty calories (energy) without much nutrients. "Sugar is essential to generate energy for the body to survive," says Ms Chow. "However, it is not necessary to include sugary food or drinks with added sugar in our diet. Carbohydrate-rich foods such as rice, noodles, bread, biscuits, fruits, milk, yoghurt and some starchy vegetables [that we eat] will be digested into sugar to provide energy."

Consumed in excess, added sugar can adversely affect your health. Some sources of sugar are more detrimental than others, perhaps none more so than sugary drinks. These include fizzy sodas, fruit drinks, juices, canned and packet drinks such as lemon tea or chrysanthemum tea and cordial, as well as sweetened teas and coffees.

"Sugar does not contribute to diabetes on its own. But there are studies that link drinking sugary drinks with diabetes," explains Ms Chow. What's more, consuming

THE FACTS ABOUT EATING SUGAR

Sugar (sucrose) is a carbohydrate found naturally in most plants but especially in sugarcane and sugar beets. Sucrose is actually two simpler sugars stuck together: fructose and glucose.

One of the problems with fructose is that it 'fools' our brains into consuming more than what we need to, while not addressing our hunger pangs. Our brains regulate calorie intake — theoretically speaking, if you eat more of one food (like starchy potatoes for instance), you should automatically eat less of something else. However, sugary drinks contain mostly fructose, which does not lower the hunger hormone ghrelin in the same way as glucose, the main carbohydrate found in starchy foods. In addition, the consumption of liquid sugar is usually on top of total calorie intake. Sugary drinks don't make you feel full, so you end up not only

Sour Side To Artificial Sweeteners

Artificial sweeteners such as saccharin, acesulfame, aspartame, neotame, and sucralose have been approved as safe for consumption, but whether they are ultimately better is still being debated. One concern is that as taste buds can become accustomed to the extreme sweetness of

artificial sweeteners, less sweet foods such as fruit or vegetables become less appealing. Researchers theorise that the sweeteners stop the brain from associating sweetness with calories, and as a result, people end up consuming more, and not less, sweet food.

Participants in a Texan study who drank more than 21 diet drinks a week were twice as likely to become overweight or obese. Another study showed a link between daily consumption of diet drinks and an increased risk of metabolic syndrome and type 2 diabetes.

a lot of sugar can lead to tooth decay as it provides easily-digestible energy for bad bacteria in the mouth. The extra calories from eating sugar also contribute to weight gain, and being overweight increases the risk of developing diabetes. A recent study by the University of Texas has even linked refined sugar consumption to cancer. Tests in mice showed that consuming more fructose (sugar is made up of glucose and fructose) is linked to a higher cancer risk, according to research published in the journal *Cancer Research*.

Natural = Healthier?

A popular misconception is that natural sugars such as honey, brown sugar, or rock sugar are healthier. So does this mean that herbal drinks or teas that claim to be 'naturally brewed' are better? "Some ingredients used to brew health or herbal teas include fruits like *luo han guo* ("longevity" or monk fruit), water chestnut and red dates. While these ingredients contain natural sugars which contribute to the sweet taste, many of these drinks — although not all — have added sugar. Some of the sugars added to these drinks may include rock sugar, brown sugar, raw sugar or honey," says Ms Chow. "As all types of sugar carry about the same calories, consuming these drinks can contribute towards excess calories and weight gain as well."

drinks also contain added sugar for flavouring purposes. "Read food labels. The nutrition panel or ingredients list will tell you a drink's sugar content," says Ms Chow.

To kick the sugar habit, there are a few naturally sweet alternatives that you might want to try. These taste much sweeter than sugar so you can use much less to achieve the same level of sweetness. Try agave syrup (made from a type of cactus) or stevia (a herb extract that is 150–200 times sweeter than sugar) in your next cup of tea. These are generally recognised as safe by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Or you could consider using

artificial sweeteners. The FDA has approved five artificial sweeteners (aspartame, acesulfame potassium, neotame, saccharin and sucralose) but these bear their own set of concerns (see box). As such, there is no 'best' substitute for sugar, says Ms Chow. The best option is to consume less of it.

- **READ THE LABEL:** Check for sugar terms such as sucrose, fructose, maltose, dextrose, or fruit juice concentrate.
- **TRY SOMETHING ELSE:** Choose alternatives labelled as 'no added sugar', 'reduced sugar' or 'low sugar'. Or drink less of what you like — a smaller cup of coffee requires a smaller amount of sugar.
- **DRINK MORE WATER:** "Water quenches your thirst more effectively," says Ms Chow. "Add some lemon for a refreshing taste without the extra calories."
- **REDUCE FREQUENCY:** Cut down on the daily number of drinks with added sugar that you consume. **LW**

*National Healthcare Group Polyclinics celebrates Dietitians' Day with events for patients and their families at all nine polyclinics. Themed 'Better Beverage Choices for Today', each polyclinic will host one event on different days from 7–11 March 2016.

WHAT ABOUT SPORTS AND ENERGY DRINKS?

Sport Drinks

- + Also called isotonic drinks, these replenish energy, water and electrolytes.
- + Contain water, carbohydrates and electrolytes such as sodium and potassium. May also contain other ingredients like vitamins or minerals.
- + Use glucose, glucose polymers, sucrose, and fructose as carbohydrate sources to improve absorption after an intensive workout.
- + There are about 80–90 calories in one serving of sport drinks (325ml).
- + Suitable for athletes who carry out endurance exercise. Not necessary for those who lead a sedentary lifestyle or who carry out low-intensity or short duration exercise. Consuming

Pick-me-up Drinks

- + Also known as energy drinks, these are different from sports drinks.
- + Are flavoured drinks that mainly contain caffeine and sugar and used to improve concentration, alertness and sports performance.
- + Contain a lot of sugar, up to 40 grams (equivalent of eight teaspoons) of sugar in one serving (250ml). Excessive or regular intake may lead to weight gain.
- + Drink with caution. Not for children, adolescents and pregnant women as they contain a large amount of caffeine.
- + Caffeine content vary between 80mg to 500mg per serving. Daily caffeine

