

How to spot added sugar in your food

Source: [SunLife](#)

Added sugar has been called a health hazard, and North Americans are being urged to cut down. But how can you spot added sugar, and how can you avoid it?

While many of us consciously try to limit our sugar intake, it isn't always easy. New research from Public Health Ontario and the University of Waterloo shows that a whopping 2/3 of packaged foods in our supermarkets contain some form of added sugar. And Canadians eat an average of 26 teaspoons of sugar daily, including added and natural sugars, according to Diabetes Canada.

How many grams of sugar should you eat in a day?

The World Health Organization (WHO) has recommended that people reduce their consumption of added sugar to 10% of their total energy intake (roughly 50 grams/12 teaspoons per day) – or even less. “A further reduction to below 5% or roughly 25 grams (6 teaspoons) per day would provide additional health benefits,” says the WHO.

“Health Canada and other health organizations around the world recommend limiting foods and drinks that are high in added sugars,” explains Kristyn Hall, a registered dietitian, owner of Energize Nutrition in Calgary and national spokesperson for the Dietitians of Canada. “Choosing foods that are low in added sugars will help in the prevention and management of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and some cancers, and lead to an overall healthier diet.”

What exactly is added sugar?

Most of the talk about sugar refers to added sugar, sometimes called “free sugars.” Diabetes Canada describes free sugars as “sugars that are removed from their original source and added to foods as a sweetener or as a preservative.” This includes honey added to tea, maple syrup on oatmeal and the sugar in cookies.

That's different from natural sugars, which make up part of the nutritional profile of unprocessed or minimally processed foods, like fruit and dairy products.

Nutritionally, foods with natural sugars tend to be superior. “These foods tend to have fibre, vitamins and minerals along with the sugar,” says Hall. “Whereas foods with added sugars may have little nutritional value.”

How do you know if a product has added sugar?

Nutrition labels can cause confusion about added sugar, because they don't list it separately from natural sugar. Instead, you'll see a single line in the nutrition panel that lists total grams of sugar, without specifying what kind.

What's more, some food manufacturers "hide" the sugar in their foods under innocent-sounding names. Health Canada's new food labelling regulations, introduced last year, will make hiding sugar more difficult. However, the law won't be fully implemented until 2021, which means you may need to scan the ingredients list thoroughly to identify sugar until then.

Look for these sources of sugar under another name:

- Cane syrup
- Corn syrup
- Agave
- Brown rice syrup
- Demerara
- Dextrose
- Dextrin, maltodextrin
- Fructose
- Fruit juice/concentrate
- Molasses
- Nectar
- Maple syrup
- Honey
- Malt syrup

As you're scanning the ingredient list, note how high sugars appear on the list. Ingredients are listed in descending order of amount, so the earlier sugars are listed, the more sugary the food, explains Hall.

Estimating the added sugar in your food

While the new labelling guidelines will make it easier to tell if a food contains added sugar, you still won't know exactly how much. However, with a little detective work, you may be able to estimate the added sugar content for some products by comparing the sweetened and unsweetened versions.

Take chocolate milk, for example. One cup (250 ml) has 25 grams of total sugar, which comes from a combination of added sugar and natural sugar. Since a cup of plain, unsweetened milk has about 13 grams of sugar (all of which is lactose, a natural sugar) you can estimate that the cup of chocolate milk has 12 grams of added sugar – 25 grams in total, minus 13 grams of natural sugar. At about 4 grams of sugar per teaspoon, that's 3 teaspoons of added sugar, right there.

Greek yogurt packs plenty of nutrients, like calcium and protein. But the sweetened version packs plenty of added sugar, too. A 175 ml serving of plain Greek yogurt contains 6 grams of natural sugar, while the sweetened, vanilla version adds another 13 grams, or more than 3 teaspoons. Use this method to estimate the added sugar in other foods where both sweetened and unsweetened versions are available, like packaged oatmeal.

Limiting your sugar intake

When you're trying to reduce the sugar in your diet, focusing on minimally processed fruits, vegetables, unsweetened whole-grain products like whole-wheat bread, quinoa, barley and lean proteins is always best, says Hall. "Look for foods that are goods your grandparents would recognize, rather than foods that come from a package."

If you're shopping for packaged foods, though, watch out for "healthy" options that can be surprisingly sugary. Many dried, packaged fruits are sweetened with sugar, says Hall. Fruit drinks, nectars, sweetened plant-based milks, flavoured yogurts and coffee-based beverages can pack in added sugar, too.

If these sweets make up some of your favourite foods, opt for half-size portions to keep your sugar intake in check. Dilute sweetened drinks with seltzer for a lower-sugar beverage, and mix plain and flavoured Greek yogurt to reduce your sugar intake. If you take milk and sugar in your coffee or tea, try lactose-free milk, which tastes sweeter than plain milk (although it's not), and you won't miss the sugar.

Though it may seem difficult to cut sugar at first, your taste buds will adjust over time and you'll feel satisfied with less sugar. In addition to boosting your overall wellbeing, cutting down sugar can also open the door to an entirely new set of healthier options and recipes to explore.