



Upper Arlington Preventative Primary Care

Sugar Intake Guidelines

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In March of 2014 the World Health Organization (WHO) released new guidelines that recommend an individual's daily intake of added non-natural sugars in packaged and processed foods and beverages should exceed no more than 5% of overall daily caloric intake. The previous recommendation from the WHO was released in 2002, and at that time it advised that no more than 10% of total daily calories come from added sugars. Cutting the recommended added sugar intake in half was a large reduction, but I believe this action was necessary.

Health and wellness recommendations from major health organizations do not happen without a tremendous amount of research and deliberation. And following more than two years of intensive review of the research literature the WHO determined that dropping the recommended daily sugar intake to 5% would reduce the risk to Americans' health for several disease states. Further, the recommendation on severely limiting added daily sugar intake from the American Heart Association is consistent with the new WHO guidelines.

The tipping point for the WHO guidelines change followed the results of a benchmark study indicating that consuming too much added sugar in processed and packaged food significantly increases your risk of death from heart disease. Other research has clearly linked a high intake of added sugars to a number of adverse health conditions, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

The recommendation includes sugar that is added to any food, and also includes fruit juices with additional sugar added as well as fruit concentrates. Added sugars go by many diverse names and include table sugar, brown sugar, all varieties of syrups, honey, confectioners glaze, dried cane extract, dextrose, high-fructose corn syrup, agave nectar, molasses, and other calorie containing sweeteners found in prepared and processed foods and beverages.

To be clear, the WHO recommendation on total daily sugar intake does not include the sugars that occur naturally in fruits, vegetables, and milk and dairy products. Eating whole unprocessed fruits and vegetables is always a healthy and smart dietary choice.

Unfortunately, a large percentage of the sugars we consume today do not come from natural, unprocessed whole food choices. Instead they are found in processed and packaged foods that

most people would not define as a treat or as sweets. For example, one tablespoon of ketchup contains approximately one teaspoon of sugar. And additional sugar is often added to frozen pizza, many bread products, soups, many types of yogurt, nearly all breakfast cereals, mayonnaise, and even most “healthy” energy bars.

Research indicates that nearly 85% of all processed and packaged foods and beverages contain added sugar or some form of additional sweetener. Many food manufacturers began adding additional sugar to their products when consumers became increasingly concerned about the amount of fat in their food. Manufacturers responded with hundreds of low-fat items, but often substituted additional sugar or other sweeteners to help maintain the palatability of the product.

In order to determine the number of calories from sugar contained in a product simply multiply the grams of sugar by four. For example, a product containing 20 grams of sugar will have 80 calories per serving from sugar. And if you consume 2,000 calories a day that equates to 4% of your daily calories.

For an adult with a normal body mass index (BMI), consuming 5% of daily calories from added sugar (the WHO recommendation) would equate to approximately 25 grams of sugar (i.e., six teaspoons) per day. Keep in mind that 25 grams of sugar is less than what is typically found in a single 12-ounce can of regular (non-diet) soda, which contains approximately 40 grams of sugar.

The new WHO guidelines can serve as a strong reminder that the onus is on the consumer to read and scrutinize nutrition labels. Educate yourself about your food choices, read the labels carefully. A beneficial tip is that when you read a nutrition label, if any form of added sugar is in the first three ingredients put the product back on the shelf.

Quality whole food choices can have medicinal properties, as the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates said, “Let food be thy medicine, and medicine be thy food”. You only get one body and what food and beverage products you put into it every day truly matters.