

Sugar

Sugar has a very bad reputation. The World Health Organization though recommends that sugar can be eaten in moderation as part of a healthy diet. Ideally, we should stick to an upper intake limit of 10% of total daily calorie intake.

Women aged between 19 and 50 have an average daily energy requirement of around 1,940 calories per day. 10% of that daily energy requirement equates to an "allowance" of 52 g of sugar per day.

It can be very difficult to keep track though because sugar comes in many forms.

Sugar and starch are both carbohydrates. About 60% of the carbohydrates that we eat are starches and about 40% are sugars.

Starchy foods are plant-based foods, such as breakfast cereals, bread, potatoes, pulses, pasta and rice. Vegetables also contain some starch. Most fruits contain no starch, with the exception of bananas. The carbohydrates in these foods are called polysaccharides or the simpler name – complex carbohydrates.

Sugars are either intrinsic or extrinsic. Carbohydrates such as those found in fruit are intrinsic sugar and vegetables can be a mixture of complex carbohydrate and intrinsic sugars. Intrinsic sugars are part of the cellular structure of the food.

Extrinsic sugars are also known as "free" sugar, they are found in table sugar, honey, fruit squashes, cakes, biscuits, confectionary, and there are many more examples. Extrinsic sugars are not bound into the cellular structure of the food. Food manufacturers add extrinsic sugar to many food products.

Ideally our diets should contain at least 50% of our total daily calories from complex carbohydrates and intrinsic sugars.

The above guideline of an allowance of 10% from sugar refers to extrinsic sugar – the sugar we add to food and the sugar that has been so carefully added to the food products which we buy.

It is very easy to consume more extrinsic sugar than you would think.

One small slice of Victoria sponge for example contains 24 g sugar and one standard can of cola 36 g – a total of 60 grams of sugar in one small snack, and more than the recommended daily "allowance" for a woman aged 19 – 50.

The daily "allowance" of 52 grams can be reached by having:

- two coffees, sweetened with 2 spoonfuls of sugar (20g sugar), plus
- two chocolate digestive biscuits (20 g sugar), and
- half a pint of sweet cider (12 g of sugar).

The main reasons we need to watch our sugar intake are:

- A diet high in sugar has consequences for dental health;
- Too many sugary foods can provide excess calories and will be detrimental to weight control;
- Sugary foods are often depleted of vitamins, minerals and fibre.