



I Want Candy

A FEW GUMMY BEARS HERE, A COUPLE OF CHOCOLATES THERE . . . WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL? I COULD BREAK MY SUGAR HABIT ANYTIME—OR SO I THOUGHT.

By Stephanie Dolgoff

Photographs By Plamen Petkov

WHAT A ROUGH MORNING for bear-shaped food! After I finish the leftover waffles drenched in maple syrup from my daughters' plates, I pop a couple of their gummy bear vitamins. A few chocolate-chip teddy-shaped cookies disappear on their way into the girls' lunch boxes. On my commute to work, I pick up a yogurt smoothie. That fails to keep me going for long, which explains the mountain of balled-up foil wrappers from those teeny-tiny chocolate squares piled next to my keyboard as I write this. I have grand plans for a healthy salad with the right balance of protein and vegetables for lunch, but I can tell I'm going to need something sweet for dessert. I almost always do. Who am I kidding? It's 11 A.M. and I feel like chewing someone's arm off.

The sick part about all this is that, as a health writer, I know exactly what's going on. My blood sugar is doing its manic-depressive dance, soaring after each sweet snack as my insulin level rises to process the sugar into energy, then plummeting lower than low so it's all I can do to drag my agitated, fatigued body over to the vending machine for something sweet.

Clearly I have to cut back—and most of us should. My kick in the (slightly too tight) pants? A recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* says that Americans eat an average of 21 teaspoons of added sugar a day (meaning sugar that's not naturally occurring, as in fruit or milk). The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends a max of just *six* teaspoons a day for women. According to the *JAMA* study, those who eat lots of added sugar are much more likely to have risk factors for heart disease. Gummy bears could lead to a heart attack? Yikes! Excess sugar has other proven consequences, of course, from diabetes to cavities, says Miriam Vos, M.D., an assistant professor at Emory University and coauthor of the study. Not to mention all the extra empty calories.

That's it. I'm doing it. I don't have a weight problem (though I do have to jump up and down to get my jeans over my butt). I get tired a lot, which I suspect has to do with my blood sugar rising and falling too sharply. Mostly I don't like being a slave to sugar, doing an involuntary face-plant in the candy bowl every time I walk past it. I'd like to take back my self-control. So for the next month, I'm going to avoid sugary desserts, snacks and drinks and ferret out as much added sugar as I can in the rest of the food I eat. The AHA's ceiling of six teaspoons, or 24 grams (roughly 100 calories' worth of sugar a day), sounds reasonable. How hard could it be?

DAY 1

CRAVE-O-METER: 10

I've decided that "starting" includes a day in which I get to observe my normal eating habits and inventory my pantry. I spend a half hour familiarizing myself with which foods have added sugar and disposing of or quarantining any remaining temptations so I'll be good to go.

Let's see. . . In the freezer, the high-sugar culprits include fat-free vanilla and chocolate ice-cream sandwiches, mango sorbet and those yogurts in a

tube for the kids. I can resist the yogurt and the sorbet, but with regret, I toss the ice-cream sandwiches (although one—with 15 grams, or almost four teaspoons, of sugar out of my allotted six—goes into my mouth). The thing about low-fat sweets is that it often means the manufacturer has added *more* sugar than if they were regular fat, to give them a satisfying taste and texture. I've nearly shot my day's allowance with just one snack!

In the cabinet, there's syrup and jam and cocoa, all loaded with added sugar, but I leave them alone, because they're not something I'd just eat out of the jar. Annoyingly enough, labels don't distinguish between added and naturally occurring sugar. If you don't mind doing a bit of math, though, you can divide the number of grams of sugar by four. That tells you how many teaspoons of sugar, most of which you can assume is added, are in the product—unless it's fruit or dairy, which has natural sugar.

You can also check the ingredients list for one of the many aliases sugar goes by, such as dextrose, maltose, fructose, maltodextrin and high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS). Some sound less sugary and more natural, like beet sugar or pure cane sugar, but they're still sugar. The ingredients are listed in order of quantity, so if sugar is first or second, it's a sign that you're in Candy Land. The jar of tomato sauce contains added sugar, and—holy smokes!—HFCS is the first ingredient in my "light" salad dressing. There's even sugar in my canned chili!

DAY 2

CRAVE-O-METER: 10

I keep my mitts off my kids' leftover breakfasts, even though they're so much more fun than mine. I asked **Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *Beat Sugar Addiction Now!***, what kind of breakfast I should eat to help curb my sugar cravings. He says eggs, high in protein with some fat, will help me feel full so I won't be tempted to grab the first granola bar that looks my way.

Self-control?
It's me,
Stephanie.
I want you back.
I need your help!



Nuts and cheese, both of which have fat and protein, are also good choices. So I'm eating scrambled eggs without my usual ketchup, since the label says it has HFCS in it.

A high-protein breakfast notwithstanding, by 10:30 I badly want something sweet. Again after lunch, and late at night, I'm contemplating the mango sorbet I usually don't care for. The morning craving feels like hunger; in the afternoon it feels as if I want something to balance the savory taste of my lunch. The evening craving is brutal—it feels as if I just want something nice to happen to me before bed. But I resist, opting for sweet sleep instead.

DAY 3

CRAVE-O-METER: 9

I have begun to avoid the kitchen if I'm feeling whiny and weak, which turns out to be often. I think if I just had a cookie I'd be in a better mood. And it's only day three! I can't be that big a loser. I wonder if I am, in fact, a sugar addict. Is there such a thing? Dr. Teitelbaum thinks so, and there is some evidence from research that sugar has some mild addictive properties. Or is our love of sugar simply a habit, and not a physical drive? Sam Andrews, M.D., author of *Sugar Busters* and director of clinical diabetes at the Ochsner Medical Center in New Orleans, says, "You're not going to go into withdrawal. You can make a conscious decision not to eat dessert."

But here's the thing: I like the way sugar tastes, and I'm not sure I can limit myself. I guess that makes me an addict. Dr. Vos assures me my taste buds will eventually recalibrate and not want so much sweetness. We'll see.

DAY 6

CRAVE-O-METER: 8

So far I've noticed no recalibration of my taste buds. I have been doing almost everything right. I'm eating small meals with protein, fat and some complex carbs (like whole grains and veggies) while avoiding sweets and white-flour foods that turn right into sugar. This should keep my blood sugar from dipping so low that I'd scarf down whatever sugary mess came home in my kids' birthday party goody bag. But the three-times-a-day cravings are still there. Not having sweets in the house is pretty much the only reason I'm not caving in to temptation. I start daydreaming about chocolate-covered caramels. I'm working at home and feeling a bit hungry, and those caramels seem like the kind of quick pleasure break I need. But in the end sloth wins because I'm too lazy to go to the store and buy them.

Instead, I crunch down a handful of

almonds. They're fine, but let's be honest: They're a pathetic substitute for caramels. They aren't even sweet, so I eat the most sugary thing left in the house: one of those yogurt-tube treats the kids like. It has nine grams of sugar, more than two teaspoons. It doesn't taste super-sweet to me, as I'm told it would have if I'd lost my taste for sweetness. Still, the yogurt and almond combo fills me up, and I soon forget about the caramels. Small victory.

DAY 10

CRAVE-O-METER: 6

Much of my sugar eating is unconscious. As I'm loading the dishwasher, I slurp down the remainder of my daughter's soggy sweet cereal before I think about it. I polish off three toffees (10 grams of sugar out of my daily allotment of 24) from the candy dish at the office while chatting with a coworker—it's as though my hands have a mind of their own, unwrapping them while I comment on the weather. In the evening, as my daughters are playing with a birthday present (a plastic pump gun that discharges mini marshmallows), one of them somehow lands in my mouth. I'm a victim!

But the good news is that these little sugar lapses don't seem to trigger big cravings, probably because I've cut down overall and my body isn't constantly cranking out insulin to process all the sugar. Cravings are largely driven by low blood sugar. When you eat less sugar overall, your blood sugar doesn't spike and drop quite so crazily. In short, I think I've broken the cycle! It's also probably why I'm less tired all the time—my energy is more even.

DAY 14

CRAVE-O-METER: 5

I'm having lunch, peanut butter on a whole-grain rice cake, and I'd like to put a little jam on it. Just a little. I know jam is sugary, but I'm cutting back, not quitting cold turkey, right? So I survey the jars in my fridge and am surprised by the range: One has 13 grams of sugar

per tablespoon, another has five, and another, which boasts that it is sweetened only with fruit-juice concentrate, has six. The best choice, though, would be to cut up some fruit and top the rice cake with that, for fiber with no added sugar. So guess what? I put the jam away and get out some strawberries. The berries do the trick, cutting the salty taste of the peanut butter. I think I'm getting the hang of this!

DAY 19

CRAVE-O-METER: 8

Uh-oh—setback! My husband brings home a pint of my favorite fancy ice cream. If it had gone into the freezer without my seeing it, I think I might have been fine. But I've had such a bad day that when I see the carton, it's like one of those movie moments where the set goes dark, music swells up, a white spotlight shines on me and the ice cream and everything else falls away. I'm a goner, and so is half the pint and a whopping 44 grams of sugar.

I'm no stranger to emotional eating, using food to soothe, but there is a physical aspect, too. "Feel like screaming after a stressful day at work? Low blood sugar, cortisol and serotonin may be driving your edgy mood—and your sugar cravings," says Dr. Teitelbaum. The key is to vent the emotions or dispel your stress with a walk or a bath, which may dampen the chemical cravings for sweets. Next time.

DAY 23

CRAVE-O-METER: 3

Finally, my cravings are much weaker, and it's easier to distract myself from them. If I can't shake a craving, especially at night, I'll have a diet soda or an ice cream with aspartame in it, even though artificial sweeteners may make it harder for your taste for sweetness to adjust, some experts say. The jury is still out on that one, but I feel fine about having a little aspartame or stevia. In a dessert, okay, but I've stopped putting artificial sweeteners in my coffee and am down to one diet soda a day.





When I get hungry, it's no longer that ravenous feeling.

DAY 27

CRAVE-O-METER: 2

When I get hungry, it's no longer the crazy, ravenous feeling I had when I was eating more sugar. I think my taste buds are finally calming down, too. I had a bite of my daughter's butter-scotch sundae yesterday and honestly felt like it was throat-closingly sweet. I never, ever thought I'd say that.

DAY 30

CRAVE-O-METER: 1

I've lost five pounds. I didn't count calories, but I suspect I've been eating a lot fewer. It might also be that because I ate less sugar, the insulin in my bloodstream could do its job, and there was little left over to be stored as fat. With a lower insulin level, my body could more efficiently metabolize the food I was eating and turn to stored fat for the rest of its energy.

So my experiment is officially over.

No one would know if I decided to run out and celebrate with the chocolate-covered caramels I love. But the real victory is that I don't feel the need. My craving is gone. I think I'll take my daughters for a walk to celebrate. Just to be safe, we'll avoid the route that goes past our favorite doughnut shop. ■