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Health Head-Scratcher of the Week
Is High-Fructose Corn Syrup Really Worse Than Sugar?

Recent research has left consumers confused about which is the greater evil, table sugar or high-fructose corn syrup. We found out the not-so-sweet truth.

By Annie Hauser, Senior Editor

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Kellogg's Nutri-Grain bars — those tasty fruit-filled snacks available at every supermarket — seem like a smart choice. But little do most consumers realize that their real-fruit goodness also comes with a one-two punch of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and added sugar. Makes you want to switch to a different option, such as the HFCS-free Quaker Chewy Granola Bar, right?

We don't mean to burst your bubble, but the fact that a snack comes sans HFCS isn't a guarantee that it is healthier. Although that is hard for some consumers to believe — HFCS has been vilified for decades because of its suspected role in **weight gain** — a slew of new studies, along with notable medical groups including the American Medical Association and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, say it's true: HFCS is no better or worse than regular table sugar. But because much of the research has been conducted by scientists with financial ties to HFCS producers or backed by the Corn Refiners Association, the legitimacy of some data has been questioned. One example: A recent study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, which found sugar and HFCS to be equal culprits in causing weight gain, was conducted by researchers with financial ties to the HFCS-loving Coca-Cola Company.

Meanwhile, the Corn Refiners Association is adding to the confusion by rebranding HFCS as "corn sugar," and running marketing campaigns claiming that HFCS is simply a sweetener that's metabolized by the body the same as sugar or honey. The association even filed a petition with the FDA last year to make corn sugar the widely used name on food labels in place of HFCS. Meanwhile, the FDA has released statements cautioning consumers that corn sugar and HFCS are identical substances.

One person with a strong opinion about whether there's a real winner in the HFCS vs. sugar debate is Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of *Beat Sugar Addiction NOW!* and an Hawaii-based internist

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who studies sugar addiction, chronic fatigue, and fibromyalgia.

"I think high-fructose corn syrup and sugar are both equally poisonous because of the massive volumes that are added to our diet each year," Dr. Teitelbaum warns. "Basically, the argument is between two sides holding jugs of poison arguing over which one kills you one second quicker. It boils down to which poison do you want to take, and the answer should be neither."

Joan Salge Blake, MS, RD, LDN, and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics agrees.

"High-fructose corn syrup is just another type of added sugar that is used in the diet. It's metabolized exactly like sugar," she says. "The overall take-home message is that we've got to reduce the total amount of added sugars in our diets."

Between refined flours such as those used to make bread and pasta, classic sugary treats, and **processed foods** that don't even taste sweet, such as ketchup and salad dressing, the average American takes in far too much added sugar. The American Heart Association recommends consuming no more than 6 teaspoons of added sugar a day for women and 9 teaspoons a day for men. But the average adult has 22 teaspoons daily — a number that even excludes naturally occurring sugars such as those in fruit and dairy products, which Salge Blake says are fine to eat. (To find out how many teaspoons of sugar there are in any given food, divide the number of sugar grams in one serving by four.)

All this sweet stuff not only enlarges your waistline, but it is also strongly linked to serious health issues, including **type 2 diabetes**, hypertension, stroke, and memory loss.

"Honey, high-fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, sucrose, molasses — these are all sources of added sugars that we need to reduce in our diet," Salge Blake says. "Sixty-five percent of Americans are overweight, and getting rid of foods like these that are just empty calories can potentially help manage weight."

What's a Sugar Lover to Do?

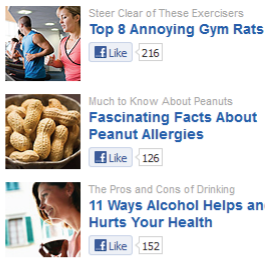
For an all-natural sweetener that comes without harmful side effects, Teitelbaum recommends **stevia**, a no-calorie substance extracted from the leaves of South American stevia plants. He warns that some stevia varieties can be quite bitter, so he suggests trying Sweet Leaf stevia packets or Body Ecology liquid stevia drops for more palatable options. He also encourages soda addicts to try Zevia All-Natural Soda (sold at Whole Foods and other groceries) as a much healthier alternative to classic Coke.

Teitelbaum is an advocate of keeping sweeteners like HFCS and sugar where they count most — in desserts. He does, however, firmly maintain that **dark chocolate** is a health food because of it has a large amount of disease-fighting antioxidants. If you want healthy sugar-free chocolate, he says, choose a sweetener with a name ending in "ol," such as maltitol. Maltitol is a sugar alcohol, which sweetens like sugar but with fewer calories and less of a negative effect on blood glucose.

Salge Blake says dieters should focus on eliminating empty-calorie foods and limiting portions.

"When it comes to desserts, just eat less of them," she says. "They're a sometimes food, not an all-the-time food."

The takeaway should be that whichever way you shake it, added sweeteners are bad news for your body. Limit your intake of any and all sweeteners whenever possible and save the sweet stuff for special events or occasional treats.



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