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Easy ways to cut sugar intake

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From the sweetener you stir into your morning coffee to the after-dinner dessert you can't resist, the amount of sugar you consume between breakfast and bedtime adds up quickly. Americans down more than 22 teaspoons a day, according to the USDA, which is more than double what experts recommend. At the same time, research links diets high in added sugar to increased risk for diabetes, heart attack, and stroke. So what's the best way to slash sugar without sending your relentless sweet tooth into shock?

"Save your sweet budget for things that taste great, like dessert," suggests Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *Beat Sugar Addiction Now!* Use the following strategies to cut sugar where it won't be missed and ward off cravings without feeling deprived.

COMMIT TO A SUGAR QUOTA

The first step to reducing your sugar intake: figure out exactly how much of the sweet stuff you're shoveling in. Find the grams of sugar on a nutrition label and divide that number by four. That's how many teaspoons of sugar a food or drink contains. The American Heart Association recommends that women limit themselves to no more than six teaspoons or 24 grams of sugar per day and men no more than nine teaspoons or 36 grams. The good news: how you spend those spoonfuls is entirely up to you, says Teitelbaum.

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KNOW WHAT COUNTS AS SUGAR

Natural sweeteners, like evaporated cane juice, agave nectar, honey, and fruit juice concentrates, might have healthy advantages over refined sugar and high fructose corn syrup, but that doesn't mean they should be left out of your sugar budget. Also, don't be fooled by words like "organic" or "raw" in front of a sweetener's name—it's still sugar. Instead of getting distracted by food label lingo, zero in on the sugar grams listed in the nutrition facts panel—that's what matters, explains Teitelbaum.

DON'T FEAR ALL ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS

Sugar substitutes shouldn't be feared, but some are healthier than others, says Teitelbaum. He recommends naturally-derived, filtered zero-calorie sweeteners such as stevia and erythritol. "Keep in mind that brand matters in terms of taste." Unless stevia is properly filtered, it can leave a bitter, licorice-like aftertaste. Sweet Leaf is a good option, as are Truvia and PureVia, which are blends of stevia and erythritol. If there's no stevia in sight and all you have to choose from are the traditional pink (saccharin), yellow (sucralose), and blue packets (aspartame) of chemical-based sweeteners, pick pink. "There's a very long safety record with Sweet'n Low," says Teitelbaum.

DON'T DRINK YOUR FRUIT.

Sweetened fruit juices are one of the biggest sources of added sugar in our diets. Some varieties contain more than a teaspoon of sugar per ounce along with little real fruit. For example, a 15.2-ounce bottle of Tropicana grape juice drink packs 72 grams -18 teaspoons' worth-of sugar and contains only 30 percent juice. "Eat the fruit instead of drinking juice," advises Teitelbaum. You'd have to eat four oranges, which contain approximately 12 grams of sugar, apple, to take in the amount of sugar that's in a 16-ounce bottle of orange juice, he explains.

.OR EAT IT DRIED OR CANNED

"Always choose whole fruit instead of canned fruit or sweetened dried fruit," advises dietician Angela Ginn, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Just a third-cup of dried pineapple packs 30 grams of sugar—more than seven spoonfuls—but an entire cup of raw pineapple chunks delivers only 82 calories and 16 grams sugar. Similarly, a half-cup of Del Monte peach halves contains 23 grams of sugar and 100 calories, while a large whole peach has only 15 grams of sugar and 68 calories.

FIND GOOD-TASTING SODA ALTERNATIVES

Like fruit juice, soft drinks do serious damage in the sugar department. A 20-ounce bottle of Cherry Coca-Cola is loaded with 70 grams of sugar, for example. Teitelbaum suggests switching to coconut water, which contains a fraction of the sweet stuff (a 14-ounce bottle of Zico Natural has 60 calories and 12 grams of sugar) plus at least 500 mg of potassium per serving. Or look for beverages sweetened with stevia or erythritol, like SoBe Lifewater, Vitamin Water Zero or Zevia zero-calorie soda. But don't simply substitute your favorite soft drinks for their diet counterparts. People who consume just three diet sodas per week are 40 percent more likely to be obese, according to a University of Texas study.

RETHINK DESSERT

Just because you're keeping tabs on sugar doesn't mean you have to cut dessert out of your diet completely. Just learn to satisfy your sweet tooth with healthier, lower-sugar alternatives to cookies, ice cream, and cake, says Ginn. She suggests an ounce of dark chocolate, or warm fruit, like a baked apple, poached pear, or roasted figs.

SAVOR EVERY BITE OF CHOCOLATE

When candy cravings crop up, think quality over quantity. "You don't have to give up pleasure, pleasure is healthy," says Teitelbaum. "But instead of eating a pound of M&Ms, get the best-tasting chocolate you can find and let it melt in your mouth." He suggests picking dark chocolate over milk chocolate or opting for a sugar-free variety, like Abdallah sugar-free chocolates.

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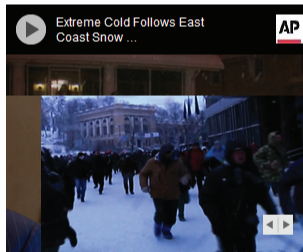
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SWAP SUGAR FOR SPICES

When a recipe calls for a huge heaping of sugar, scale back and substitute it with fuller-flavor ingredients. "Beet, sweet potato, or parsnip puree can add sweetness and moisture to baked goods while lowering sugar content," says Ginn. "Spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice can also make a recipe sweeter." The bonus: researchers at the University of Georgia found that eating a teaspoon or two of cinnamon each day helps lower blood sugar levels.

EAT A HIGH-PROTEIN BREAKFAST

We expect kids' cereal, like Lucky Charms, Trix, and Froot Loops, to be super sweet, but boxed breakfasts geared toward adults can be just as bad—or worse. One cup of Raisin Bran contains 18 grams of sugar and a serving of Kellogg's Smart Start Strong Heart Toasted Oat cereal provides 17 g. The problem: Starting your day with a bowl of refined carbs and added sugar will send your blood sugar soaring, says Teitelbaum, who recommends starting the day with blood sugar-stabilizing protein instead. "Have eggs for breakfast and you're less likely to have an energy crash an hour later," he says.

GIVE SAVORY FOODS A SECOND LOOK

You'd never douse a salad, plate of pasta, or a side of French fries with a couple spoonfuls of sugar, but there's plenty of the sweet stuff hiding in the savory-tasting condiments you use to top these foods. Two tablespoons of Ken's Fat-Free Sun-Dried Tomato Vinaigrette packs 12 grams of sugar. A half-cup of Prego Fresh Mushroom spaghetti sauce contains 10 grams of sugar. And for every tablespoon of ketchup you squeeze out you'll add 4 grams (or 1 teaspoon) of sugar to your food.

DON'T GET TRAPPED BY 'LOW FAT'

When you take out fat, you take out flavor. And when it comes to diet food, flavor is often replaced with added sugar. A good example: a Weight Watchers Smart Ones Cranberry Turkey Medallions microwaveable meal has only 250 calories and 2 grams of fat but delivers 19 grams of sugar. Or consider Skinny Cow Strawberry Cheesecake Ice Cream. You'll get to indulge in an entire mini container for only 150 calories and 1 gram of fat, but you'll also scoop up 22 grams of sugar.

RESIST A FAST FOOD FIX

Avoid the drive thru and you'll steer clear of some of the biggest sugar bombs around. Burger King's Chicken, Apple, and Cranberry Salad contains 37 grams of sugar, while three pancakes and syrup pile on 36 g. At McDonald's, a Fruit and Maple Oatmeal packs 32 grams of sugar, a small wild berry smoothie delivers 55 grams, and an M&M's McFlurry has 128 g.

BULK UP ON BLOOD SUGAR-FRIENDLY FOODS

You'll have better luck keeping yourself away from excess sugar when you eat a healthier diet all around. Being low on nutrients triggers food cravings in general, especially sugar cravings, as your body instinctually searches for the foods it needs to function, explains Teitelbaum. Pick whole, unprocessed foods, like vegetables, water-dense fruits, non-starchy vegetables, beans, nuts, and meats. These eats are low on the glycemic index, meaning they won't blow your blood sugar out of control.

SHOOT FOR 7 TO 8 HOURS OF SLEEP

It's easy to turn to sweets for an energy boost when you're feeling less than perky. While sugar may provide a temporary fix, you'll crash again in a couple of hours and crave even more of it, says Teitelbaum. Skimping on shuteye lowers levels of the fullness hormone leptin while increasing levels of the hunger hormone ghrelin, a combination that revs up your appetite (especially for sugary foods), according to researchers at Stanford University.

EXERCISE FOR ENERGY

Instead of reaching for a sugary snack when an afternoon slump hits, add a short burst of physical activity. When participants in a University of Exeter study took a brisk

15-minute walk, they consumed half as much chocolate as desk dwellers who didn't take an exercise break. What's more, regular walks make your cells more receptive to insulin, which leads to better blood sugar control, according to research from the CDC.

DRINK MORE WATER

Gulping water throughout the day can help ward off sugar cravings by keeping your stomach full and helping your body separate feelings of hunger and thirst. Since H₂O helps rid the body of toxins, proper hydration can be a key player in helping you kick your sugar habit, says Teitelbaum.

KEEP CALM

Ever notice that when you're feeling frazzled, you never reach for a healthy snack? You can blame biology for that. Stress increases levels of a chemical called corticotrophin-releasing factor in the brain, which exaggerates cravings for food rewards, especially sugar, according to a study published in BMC Biology.

CUT BACK ON CAFFEINE.

Bad news for coffee lovers: caffeine can aggravate sugar addiction. When it wears off, you feel tired, and that makes you want to energize with sugar, explains Teitelbaum. He suggests sticking to one cup of regular coffee a day. If you're gulping more than four cups daily, cut your consumption in half each week or two until you get down to one cup. That way you'll avoid the dreaded caffeine withdrawal headaches.

AND DRINK CAFFEINE-FREE TEA INSTEAD

Sipping naturally sweet licorice root tea, like caffeine-free Yogi Egyptian Licorice, helps stabilize your body's "stress handlers," or adrenal glands, says Teitelbaum. The adrenal glands help maintain stable energy and blood sugar levels during day-to-day activities, but when you're chronically stressed, they pump out appetite-revving cortisol, he explains.