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Break your sugar habit in 2012

Dr. Jack on Health and Fitness

By **Dr. Jack Rutherford**
Register Columnist

RICHMOND — Studies show Americans gain a large percentage of unnecessary weight through the consumption of empty calories containing sugar. Some people even joke about their "addiction to chocolate" or having to have that soda first thing in the morning to jolt them into consciousness. While there's no proof that sugar is addictive in humans, we do know that too much sugar can change our palates, spike our blood sugar, pack on the pounds, and alter our brain chemistry.

Researchers have shown through brain imaging that sugar fires the same neural pleasure pathways as many drugs of abuse. We also know from animal studies that rats given free access to a sugar solution will drink more and more of it until they become obese. "Research shows a biochemical response that triggers cravings and it can be as addictive as cocaine. It can be really hard to stop," said Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, author of "Beat Sugar Addiction Now! Cookbook."

If you think that you have a problem with sugar, try this 10-step approach to cutting back (no weekly meetings necessary).

1. Make a list of obvious culprits. You don't need a doctor to tell you what the worst sugar sources are. Desserts are an obvious area as are what you drink. If you're not sure, if the label says the food has more than eight grams of sugar, that's too much.
2. Find the biggest offender and break that habit first. While your motivation is strongest, tackle that problem area and conquer it. If it's a soda first thing in the morning, try substituting a diet soda or black coffee. Winning that big first battle will give you the confidence necessary to fight the challenges that lie ahead and doing it while you're at peak motivation will give you the best chance.
3. Eat protein for breakfast. If coffee and a jelly doughnut are your typical early morning fare, you're in for a crash-and-burn energy cycle. Instead, try some eggs with oatmeal or a low-sugar protein smoothie to keep your blood sugar steady throughout the day.
4. Think natural sugar. Cakes, cookies, pies, candy, and soda are refined sugars, unlike fruit and juice. You can still get your sugar intake but from much healthier sources if you substitute natural foods for refined.
5. Read food labels. If you're not sure whether that energy bar has too much sugar, use this formula. Divide the number of grams of sugar listed on the label by four to find out how many spoonfuls of sugar are in a serving. "No one wants to spend a lifetime counting grams, but if you see that a food has eight teaspoons of sugar in it, it's easier to decide you don't want to eat it," Teitelbaum said.
6. Look for hidden sources of sugar. Breakfast cereals, energy bars, white flour breads and pastas are sneaky sources of sugar that will spike your blood glucose because they are quickly converted into sugar in the body. They will put your energy cycle on a roller coaster ride.
7. Eat lunch and dinner. Skipping meals may seem like an obvious way to lose weight, but the truth is you're setting yourself up for poor food choices later on. Eating high energy, low sugar



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foods at mealtime will cut your cravings to a minimum.

8. Get plenty of rest. People often turn to a quick energy fix when they're tired. Aim for at least seven to eight hours of sleep every night and you won't find yourself looking for that feel-good sugary energy boost.

9. Don't go cold turkey. There's nothing wrong with the occasional piece of chocolate or a small bowl of ice cream now and then. Guilt is a useless emotion that can sabotage your efforts to cut back. Just keep things in perspective. As long as you're eating high-energy, low-sugar foods most of the time, a little sugar once in a while isn't anything to worry about. But, when you start to think that life won't go on unless you have that piece of chocolate cake, then it's time to remember that sugar hijacks the feel-good centers of the brain. That momentary feeling you get from the sugar can come in more lasting ways and from many other sources.

10. Start with the end in sight. Set a goal for yourself, such as running a 5K run in three months time to help supply the motivation you need to stay on track. Remember, as Mark Twain said, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there." Fighting the cravings for sugar will be a constant battle and having a tangible long-term goal will give you a partner in your war on sugar.

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