

# The Sugar Conundrum

*By Bill Bradley, Registered Dietitian and Cookbook Author*

We don't keep a lot of sugary foods in our house, for the same reason we don't have cable TV. If we had cookies in our cabinet and ice cream in our freezer, I know that I would eat them.....just as surely as I know I would be binge-watching Breaking Bad if we had cable TV.

As a dietitian, I understand the demonstrated health reasons to limit or eliminate sugar from my diet but, my body "rebels" when I eat a lot of sugar, and that's reason enough for me to cut back. I get foggy and irritable and develop indigestion.

Sweets are a powerful force to reckon with! Cravings for sweets become hard-wired in our brains. Eating sugary foods increases our endorphins and gives us a temporary "high" that contributes to our cravings. Sweet is the first taste most babies prefer after birth and we are bombarded with sugar from that point on. For millions of adults, sweets are the "food of choice" when we are overtired or dealing with stressful situations.

But, what REALLY is so bad about eating a Snicker's bar or a Ring Ding when we want a little "pick-me-up"? We've known for a long time that sugar contributes to tooth decay and weight gain, and there is much new evidence of additional dangers of eating too much sugar. Recent studies have shown that the more sugary foods we eat, the more likely we are to become insulin resistant, develop heart disease and cancer, damage our liver, increase our risk of depression, dementia and Alzheimer's and, of course, die younger.

Unfortunately, here is something we love to eat that makes us temporarily feel good yet, in the end, contributes to so many health problems. When we go to the store, sugary "tasty" foods surround us in almost every aisle. When we go to a party or celebration, there are

usually sweets galore. Sometimes, it feels like glazed doughnuts might start raining from the sky. What can we realistically do to avoid making ourselves sick from the steady stream of sugar around us? Here are a few strategies I have found helpful:

- **Know what an “ok” amount of sugar is.** We actually don’t need to eat sugar. We do need carbohydrates, but we can get them in the form of whole grains, beans, nuts, fruits and vegetables. But what is an acceptable level of sugar consumption for the general public (those who haven’t been told by their doctor to limit their sugar consumption to a certain amount)?

The World Health Organization and the American Heart Association both strongly recommend no more than 6 teaspoons of sugar per day for women and no more than 9 teaspoons per day for men. To give you some context, half of a 12-ounce Mountain Dew or 5 ounces of Strawberry Yoplait Yogurt contain 6 teaspoons of sugar.

- **Keep sugary foods out of your house.** We never have ice cream in our house. When we want ice cream, we go to our local ice cream shop and eat it there. This greatly cuts down on the amount of ice cream we eat. We tend to have the most control over our food choices when at home.
- **Eat fresh or frozen fruit.** My sugar cravings are satisfied as well with a grapefruit as with a candy bar. The difference is, I feel much better after eating the grapefruit. So, why not eat the grapefruit! Fruit has many other nutrients, including fiber, that aren’t included in most sugary processed foods. It is also lower in calories.
- **Change your work culture.** Your work environment and culture have a tremendous impact on your food choices. With small (and large) steps over time, an unsupportive work culture can change into a supportive culture, where the healthier choice is the “easier” choice and employees’ healthy decisions are supported and celebrated. One example of a small change made with a past employer was the launch of a “healthy food collection.” Employees put a few dollars into the “collection plate” each week and the company matched the contributions. A point person would use the money to buy lots of fresh fruit, hummus, baby carrots, peanut butter, and other healthy items that would be featured in the break room. Other examples of small changes include healthy potlucks or “outlawing” the regular candy bowl.
- **Have some sugar.** Give yourself permission to eat sugar on certain occasions and in limited amounts – for example, on birthdays, holidays, and other special occasions. Do try to keep in mind though, when it comes to sugar, we can’t have “special occasions every day!!”

I hope some of these suggestions help you change your relationship with sugar. Let me know if you have other strategies that work by emailing me at [bbradley@mma.org](mailto:bbradley@mma.org).