

HIDDEN SUGARS KILL

BY MARY TOSCANO

We need to think differently about sugar—and it's not just the granulated sugar that we find in our sugar bowls. Our bodies turn all carbohydrates in food (except fiber) into sugar, whether vegetable, cereal or candy. Sugar (glucose) is the body's principal source of energy—it is the fuel that powers our bodies on a cellular level. The truth is we need sugar to live.

12

teaspoons of sugar in one white bagel

79

million pre-diabetic Americans

33%

diabetic adults by 2050

Each morning on the way home from my swim workout, I pass the new kidney dialysis center in the shopping mall. It's 6 a.m. and the parking lot is full. This is Santa Cruz, California—a “healthy” town. If current trends continue, more dialysis facilities will be popping up all over America. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention forecasts that by 2050 one of three adults will have diabetes, already the leading cause of kidney failure and blindness and a major cause of heart disease, stroke and high blood pressure.

Currently one third of United States adults (79 million) are pre-diabetic...and most don't even know. This means their blood sugar is already high enough to be doing damage to their organs, eyes, nerves and brain. A 2006 study showed a significantly increased risk of developing dementia and Alzheimer's disease with blood sugars at pre-diabetic levels.

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all carbohydrates in food (except fiber) into sugar, whether vegetable, cereal or candy. Sugar (glucose) is the body's principal source of energy—it is the fuel that powers our bodies on a cellular level. The truth is, we need sugar to live.

What's important is the source of the carbohydrate. This system works perfectly when we eat whole foods and keep our sugar intake at manageable levels. But too much sugar wreaks havoc on our system. Our bodies are not designed to handle the amount of sugar we now consume. When carbohydrates are eaten, blood sugar rises. In response, the pancreas releases the hormone insulin. Insulin directs the sugar to be used for energy and stores some away for later (in the muscles and liver). If there is any extra sugar, the liver converts it to fat (reserve fuel).

SUGAR SHOCK

When sugar enters the bloodstream fast, our bodies experience “sugar shock.” This jolt sends the body into overdrive to remove the sugar from the blood. The body overcompensates by dumping large amounts of insulin

into the bloodstream. This removes too much sugar, causing the blood sugar to drop precipitously. Most people respond by eating more sugar, repeating the cycle. And once one starts riding the roller coaster, one can't get off until the ride ends.

Elevated blood sugars devastate the body. In the long term it can lead to diabetes, skin problems, a weakened immune system, weight gain, high cholesterol, heart disease and premature aging. Our bodies are simply not designed to deal with continuous sugar assaults. We can

handle an occasional ice cream or doughnut. However, a diet rich in processed foods and sweets wears down the body's “Blood Sugar Control Team”—the liver, pancreas and kidneys. It also leads to insulin resistance.

Eating a diet of sugar and processed foods means high levels of insulin are needed to keep the blood sugar at normal levels. Just as certain medications lose their effectiveness over time, the body becomes resistant to insulin. This means the pancreas must produce

ever-increasing amounts of insulin. It also means more sugar will be stored as body fat, which makes the body even more resistant to insulin. Eventually, the pancreas is unable to produce enough insulin to compensate for this resistance, the blood sugar stays high and type 2 diabetes develops.

Insulin resistance and diabetes are the result of poor dietary choices (especially if combined with genetics). The good news is that the opposite is also true. When we make healthy dietary choices, the long-term effects



are positive. Our bodies remain youthful and strong as we get older. At any age, people can become healthier by making positive choices, starting today.

OBVIOUS HIDDEN SOURCES

There are obvious sources of sugar like soda, candy, cakes, cookies and kid's cereals. Then there are the foods that contain little or no sugar but turn into sugar as soon as they hit your tongue: saltines, snack crackers, bagels,

bread, pretzels and most breakfast foods (waffles, pancakes, cereals, toast). The packaging for these foods typically has words like "whole grain," "natural" and "reduced sugar." They fool us into thinking the food is healthy, but the sugar from the flour is being dumped into the blood faster than eating plain table sugar! The saliva in the mouth converts the flour directly to glucose—no digestion necessary—making flour the real "hidden sugar."

Juices are also a huge source of sugar. Most people know to avoid soda. But that little glass of orange juice you had for breakfast (one cup) contains 7 teaspoons of sugar! ■

Because of her family history (both sets of grandparents died from complications of diabetes) and her own sensitivity to sugar, Toscano, a certified nutrition educator, dedicated herself to figuring out the role of sugar in health. She is author of Sweet Fire: Sugar, Diabetes & Your Health.

TIPS FOR BETTER BLOOD SUGAR CONTROL

1 READ LABELS

I became acutely aware of the amount of sugar I was eating when I started figuring out the number of teaspoons of sugar in food. I use a simple trick to get the teaspoons—take the "sugars" number on the nutrition label and divide by four. Then multiply by the number of servings per container. For example, a bottle of apple juice has 40 grams of sugar. Divide 40 by 4. That's 10 teaspoons of sugar! I became horrified when I started figuring out the sugar in the foods I was eating in which flour was the first ingredient. Since flour converts to sugar immediately, I use "total carbs" (minus fiber) instead of the sugars number. Imagine my shock to find out the white bagel I was eating was putting more sugar in my blood (12 tps.) than a jelly donut (8 tps.). Testing my blood sugar confirmed this.

2 EAT A WIDE VARIETY OF WHOLE FOODS

A whole food is one that is in its natural, unprocessed state. Our bodies thrive when we eat whole foods because they contain the nutrients that are in the perfect balance for our bodies. Try to get as many nutrients per calorie when eating. Foods that are rich in color such as dark leafy greens and brightly colored vegetables provide a variety of micronutrients that energize and heal the body. Do most grocery shopping in the produce section. Pick fruits and vegetables the family has never tried before. (Just one new food every month would be 12 in a year.)

3 LIMIT PROCESSED FOODS

It's nearly impossible to avoid processed foods. Ask "What was the original whole food used to make this?" and "How much has this food been processed?" An orange is better than juice and fresh vegetables better than canned.

4 EAT MORE FIBER

High fiber diets are not just good for blood sugar control. Getting more fiber in the diet is one of the best things you can do for good health. Legumes, nuts, seeds and most vegetables are good sources of fiber. *The American Heart Association* recommends 25 to 30 grams of fiber daily (twice as much as the average American consumes). Increase fiber intake gradually.

5 EAT GOOD FATS

Fat (like fiber) slows down the rate at which sugar hits the bloodstream. This gives the body more time to absorb all the nutrients that are present in the food—especially fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K which require the presence of fat to be absorbed properly. Best fats are extra virgin olive oil and minimally processed coconut oil. Omega-3 fatty acids increase receptivity to insulin. The best sources of omega-3 fats are flax, salmon, krill and walnut oil. Flax oil can be added to salad dressings or put in smoothies. Fish oil can be taken as capsules or oil (usually flavored).

6 EXERCISE

Exercise is a key factor in blood sugar control and one of the best ways to increase the body's sensitivity to insulin. Lack of exercise is a risk factor in getting diabetes. Exercising for just 30 minutes daily can lower the risk of getting diabetes by 60%.



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