

The Bitter Truth About Sugar

[Aadhya Ramineni](#)

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Despite it being unhealthy, children are drawn to sugary foods | Photo Credit: [Aadhya Ramineni](#)

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Sugar is synonymous with happiness. But the momentary illusion of happiness brought by it is not worth a lifetime of disease and sadness, cautions Aadhya Ramineni, who, through a series of photos, interviews and talks across schools in Tamil Nadu, hopes to reverse the media’s portrayal of sugar and raise awareness about the negative effects of overconsumption.

Many people are aware that too much sugar is bad for them, but that doesn’t stop them from literally consuming heaps — the average Indian consumes about 20 kilos of sugar — of the sweet poison. The problem is that most people don’t know why sugar is “bad”, and that the substance is highly addictive. In this three-part series we will delve into the effects of sugar on the body, the sugar industry, and how to cut down and eat a healthy amount of sugar.

Three Main Categories Sugar

To detect healthy and unhealthy foods it’s important to know what natural, added and free sugars refer to. A public report by The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India defines the three categories of sugar as follows:

Natural Sugars: “Naturally built into the structure of foods such as fruits and vegetables... and milk.”

Added Sugars: “refers to sugars and syrups added to foods and drinks during processing and preparation.”

Free Sugars: “refers both to added sugars, like sucrose or table sugar, and sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices and fruit concentrates.

Most free sugars consumed are added to foods and drinks. Free sugars do not include sugar that is naturally built into the structure of foods or sugars naturally present in milk and milk products.”

By avoiding foods with high amounts of added and free sugars, you can make sure you are consuming a healthy amount of sugar. The World Health Organization recommends 6 teaspoons (25g) a day.

Diabetes

India has the highest number of adults with type 2 Diabetes across the world. The International Diabetes Federation estimates that there were 72 million cases of diabetes in India as of 2017. By 2045, this number is projected to more than double. According to the World Health Organization, diabetes is now the seventh most frequent cause of death around the world.

Type 2 diabetes is commonly called “sugar” because it is a lifestyle ailment caused by sugar overconsumption. The pancreas produces insulin which regulates sugar in the bloodstream by converting it into glucose. Then the glucose is stored in fat cells, red blood cells, and muscle cells throughout the body which can be used as energy later. If an individual regularly eats too much sugar their pancreas will produce too much insulin and the body’s cells will develop insulin resistance. This means that the glucose can’t easily be stored in the body’s cells, thus causing an excess of sugar in the bloodstream. Consequently, the pancreas stops producing insulin and, therefore, all sugar consumed remains in the blood stream. Some researchers call Alzheimer’s Type 3 diabetes, because it occurs when there is insulin resistance in the brain.

Effects on the Brain

Throughout history, sugar was a source of fast energy which helped humans survive. Now that food is mass produced, we don’t need to consume sugar for survival. But evolution hasn’t adapted our brains to this new trend of easy access to food. Since dopamine is released to reward us any time we do something that helps us survive, the brain still produces large amounts of dopamine, or the “feel good” hormone when we eat sugar. Drugs trick the brain into releasing abnormal amounts — nearly 2 to 10 times the normal amount — of dopamine. By adding sugar into most foods, the food industry has enhanced sugar’s addictive property.

Processed foods, including ketchup, yogurt and oatmeal, are spiked with sugar. Sugar overconsumption causes the brain to release too much of the reward hormone, thus making parts of the brain insensitive to it. Over time, we must consume greater amounts of sugar to feel good. However, this “good feeling” only lasts for 15 to 40 minutes and is inevitably followed by a crash. Thus, sugar causes the vicious cycles of intense cravings which many of us fight throughout the day. In this manner sugar over consumption is related to neurological problems like depression, anxiety, dementia and even Alzheimer’s. Sugar also impairs memory and learning by literally slowing down the brain.

So next time you’re eating added sugars in biscuits or even milk, be aware of the long-term effects of sugar overconsumption and the addictive nature of sugar. Although a scoop of ice cream now and then won’t do any harm, it’s better to avoid processed foods as much as possible since they often have little nutritional value but are packed with harmful preservatives, artificial colours and of course, loads of sugar. A healthy alternative is to make your own ice cream at home, so that you know what ingredients and how much go into it. Snacking on homemade and natural foods, such as fruits, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and vegetables, is also a positive lifestyle change. Once you remove added sugars from your diet you will enjoy the natural sweetness from foods. Sugary foods will become too sweet; They will taste like what they are: junk.