

WELLBEING

The Sweet TRUTH

It may make food tastier and give us a quick energy boost, but sugar is also a major cause of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. We ask a top nutritionist for tips on how to stop caning the sweet stuff

From the spoonful you add to your morning coffee to the hidden ingredient lurking in many everyday foods, sugar may seem sweet and innocent, but the reality can be bitter indeed. When consumed excessively, it can have negative effects on our health, with symptoms ranging from energy dips and headaches to tooth decay, obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and premature ageing.

Nevertheless, it seems we can't get enough of it. According to 2011's National Diet and Nutrition Survey, the average Brit consumes about 700g of sugar a week, but the current advice is to limit intake to around 490g a week for men, 350g for women. So if you're concerned about your sugar intake and want to cut back or even give up altogether, what's the best way to succeed?

According to Cassandra Barns, a nutritional therapist at online specialist NutriCentre, it's all about choosing the right foods, the

right supplements and the right-sized meals.

“Aim for foods that have a low glycaemic load, as their impact on blood sugar level is minimal and you’ll be less likely to experience blood glucose highs and lows that will have you reaching for the cookie jar,” she says. “Make sure each meal includes protein, non-starchy vegetables and unrefined carbohydrates. Limit sweet-tasting vegetables like parsnips, potato and carrots, and opt for green veg such as broccoli and spinach – ideally, these should make up half your plate. Good protein like lean turkey, eggs, fish and beans are digested slowly and make you feel fuller for longer. And carbohydrates should be wholegrain varieties for the same reason.”

Here are Cassandra’s top ten tips for kicking your sugar habit:

1 DON'T SKIP BREAKFAST

“If you don’t have breakfast then often by 11am or midday your blood sugar levels will have dropped too low, making you hungry and craving sugar. Try two poached eggs on a slice of wholemeal bread with some rocket leaves, or a pot of sugar-free yoghurt with nuts and berries.”

2 START SNACKING

“A healthy snack between meals stops your sugar levels dropping too low, which can lead to cravings. Good examples include two oatcakes topped with a tablespoon of hummus or guacamole, or cottage cheese and half an avocado. Avoid bananas and grapes. Instead, opt for berries, which are naturally low in sugar.”

3 BANISH THE BOOZE

“Alcohol raises blood sugar and, being a liquid, is absorbed into the bloodstream quicker than sugar itself. Alcohol also contains more calories than sugar – seven per gram versus four per gram – while boozy binges are a classic way to set up a cycle of cravings for sugary, stodgy foods the day after. Stick to one small to medium glass of wine with a meal just once or twice a week.”

4 BE PRO PROBIOTICS

“An overgrowth of unhelpful yeasts, such as candida, in the gut can exacerbate sugar cravings. But eating sugar and high-starch foods makes the candida overgrowth worse, so we become stuck in a catch-22. To avoid this situation, try taking a high-strength, good quality



probiotic supplement such as ProVen Adult Probiotic 25 Billion (£12.95; provenprobiotics.co.uk), which is loaded with friendly bacteria.”

5 SAY NO TO STIMULANTS

“Caffeine causes our bodies to release stress hormones, leading to a cycle of energy dips and peaks and ultimately making us more likely to reach for sugary snacks. Decaffeinated coffee and tea contain other stimulants, so instead opt for naturally caffeine-free rooibos tea or grain-based coffee alternatives.”

6 USE SWEET SUBSTITUTES

“Xylitol is a naturally sweet substance found in many plants. In commercial preparations it comes as granules and looks and tastes like sugar, although is slightly less sweet. Stevia is a substance extracted from the leaf of the stevia plant. Intensely sweet, it has very few calories and minimal impact on blood glucose.”

7 CHOOSE TOP TREATS

“Three squares of good-quality chocolate made with a minimum of 70 per cent cocoa solids contain a relatively small amount of sugar. Alternatively, try a small pot of sugar-free plain yoghurt with a teaspoon of pure cocoa or raw cacao powder added.”

8 KEEP CRAVINGS IN CHECK

“The trace mineral chromium plays a vital role in supporting normal blood glucose levels and therefore helps prevent the dips that cause sugar cravings. Try taking a Chromium Picolinate tablet from Quest Supplements (from £4.04; questexcellence.com), preferably with breakfast. It may be a month or longer before the chromium takes full effect, so persevere.”

9 GET MOVING

“Moderate exercise helps us feel energised, less sluggish and healthier. It can play a part in controlling stress levels and also supports blood sugar control to avoid craving-inducing dips.”

10 DON'T WORRY

“Stress is one of the primary triggers for sugar cravings. Try to reduce stress, whether it is by delegating or decreasing your workload, taking some gentle exercise or practising yoga or meditation to help you relax. In addition, reduced stress will often lead to better sleep, resulting in better energy levels the next day.”

• The NutriCentre provides a dedicated nutrition helpline to provide assistance with health concerns and supplement enquiries. It is manned by qualified practitioners with nutritional and herbal expertise. Tel: 020-7436 5122 or visit nutricentre.com.

HEALTH NOTES

☛ Tooth or dare

Almost half of British adults would consider cosmetic dentistry to achieve a perfect smile like that of Cheryl Cole (right). But campaign group Behind the Smile has discovered an alarming lack of knowledge about dental treatments such as teeth bleaching and straightening, caps and veneers. To address this, it has set up an independent advisory website, cosmeticdentaladvice.com.



☛ Heart warming Need an excuse to book some winter sun? How about the fact that sunshine is good for your heart. In winter, the rates of heart failure, heart attacks and strokes increase. Dermatologist Dr Richard Weller suggests that the sun’s ultraviolet rays trigger the release of nitric oxide, a molecule found in the skin that improves cardiovascular health, dilating the blood vessels, regulating blood pressure and enhancing blood flow to the heart.



☛ Happy feet If you love Zumba, then your toes are in for a treat. A new footwear line has been developed specifically for the dance-based class. Incorporating Z-Slide technology to help you master the moves, the Impact Max shoes come in sizes 2½ to 8½, and cost from £70.97. Visit zumba.com.