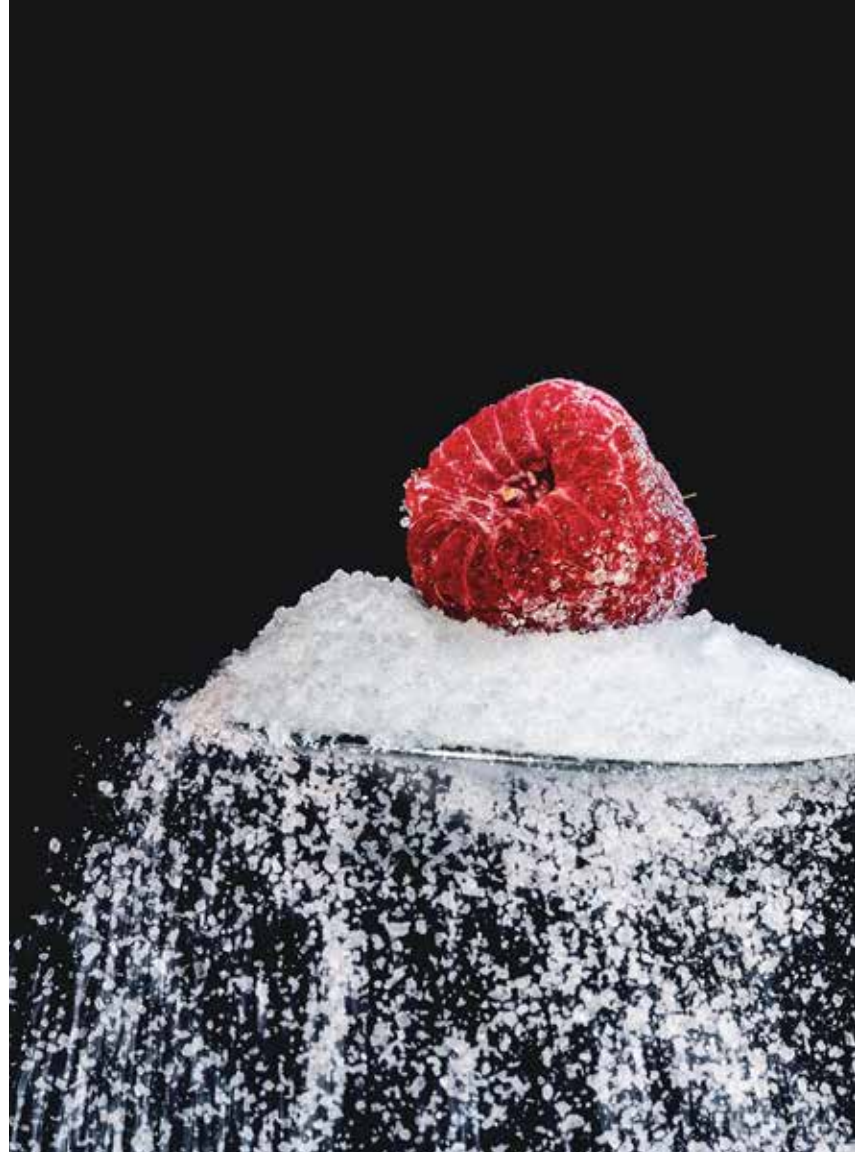




Lydia is a passionate advocate of healthy living. She has launched and positioned many health and wellness-related companies, products, technologies and organizations receiving more than 100 awards nationally and internationally. Her focus in the health sector is specifically on healthy living, aging and longevity. She is a partner and investor in several recognized national brands. She sits on the board of the Buck Institute for Research on Aging whose mission is to eliminate the threat of age-related disease for today's and future generations. It is the only independent research organization globally dedicated to extending the healthy years of life. Like the scientists at the Buck, Graham envisions it will be possible for people to enjoy life at 95 as much as at 25. To support Buck's mission, please visit www.buckinstitute.org.



KICK OFF 2023 WITH A 30-DAY SUGAR BUSTER CHALLENGE

Maybe it's time to break up with sugar?

BY BY LYDIA GRAHAM

I HOPE YOU HAD A JOYFUL HOLIDAY WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY. Here's to you in 2023! May you be healthy, happy, and inspired. Along those lines, I'll make this short and not so sweet. Maybe it's time for you to break up with sugar? Just for a little while, at least. You probably had plenty over the holidays, so the beginning of a new year is the perfect time to kick off a 30-day sugar detox. I challenge you to 30 days, as most folks abandon their health resolutions within a few weeks. It's important to stay with it.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH SUGAR?

Sugar is insidious and hidden in many foods we're not even aware of. While finding two nutritional experts or scientists who agree on any one way of eating is difficult, all agree sugar makes us sick. It feeds cancer cells and exacerbates inflammation and insulin resistance which is at the root of the diabetes and obesity epidemic today.

Sugar in significant amounts disrupts our gut's microbiome, causing a proliferation of unhealthy bacteria that crowds out healthy bacteria. This, in turn, can impact our immune function. It's widely accepted that 70 percent of our immunity resides in the gut. Too much sugar can also cause weight gain, an increase in triglycerides that contribute to heart disease, and unnecessary tooth decay.

If that's not enough to convince you, it's also highly addictive (more so than cocaine), causing us to want to eat more of it. Research by Lenoir et. al. in 2007 reported on a study of rats fed refined sugar and cocaine: the rats consistently choose sugar.

READ FOOD LABELS

Most people in the U.S. don't know how much sugar they consume, because it's not obvious. Food labels measure it in grams which most Americans cannot visualize.

This might help: four grams of sugar equals one teaspoon of sugar. To be healthy, you must be informed and know what's in your food. Food companies make that hard for us—often intentionally confusing us to sell more products.

Reading labels requires awareness and knowledge as well as forming a habit of curiosity and intention to read them. Just because something is labeled "healthy" or "natural" or is purchased in a health food aisle or store doesn't mean it is. Always look for the sugar content. I've been obsessed with eating healthy food for decades, and even so, eating healthfully remains an ongoing challenge. While food labeling is an exhaustive topic, let's break down a few basics to consider your low or no sugar journey, so you can be your own best advocate whether you grab-and-go, dine out frequently, or cook at home.

SUGAR HAS MANY NAMES

Sugar has many names: sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, and dextrose, to name only a few. Google the rest. Look for suspects in the ingredients list, but always look at total grams of sugar, then translate it into teaspoons.

Establish a baseline of how much sugar you are currently eating before you begin. Make a note of your sugar bombs—i.e., the huge hits of sugar that sabotage you, such as a Starbucks Frappuccino or a Coke in the morning. Notice how you feel after you consume these.

Try this experiment for one week before you start. Buy a one-pound bag of sugar. Keep a log of your daily sugar grams, translate it into teaspoons, and put that amount into a Mason jar. If you are not already monitoring your sugar closely, at the end of the week, your choices will change.

And sorry, honey, agave, and coconut sugar are still sugar.

NATURAL VERSUS ADDED SUGAR

It's pretty much impossible to go absolutely no-sugar, as sugar occurs naturally in many foods such as lactose in dairy or maltose in sprouted grains. Natural sugars contain fiber and nutrients, which is important. Added sugars do not.

We need to be most concerned about the sugars added by food manufacturers. (If you want to get serious, you might consider eating low glycemic foods—more about that below.)

SUGAR ALCOHOLS

A word about sugar alcohols, as you've probably seen them on food labels. They occur naturally in some exotic fruits and vegetables, and some are man-made. While they have approximately half the calories of sugar and are not fully absorbed by the small intestine, they (particularly mannitol and sorbitol) can cause intestinal discomfort in the form of bloating and diarrhea if one eats too much at a time. Sugar alcohols, like sugar, go by many names: xylitol, erythritol, hydrogenated starch hydrolysates (HSH), isomalt, maltitol, mannitol, and sorbitol.

For those of you counting carbs, if the number of sugar alcohol grams is five or greater, divide that number in half then subtract it from your total carbs for an accurate reading. If erythritol is the only sugar alcohol listed, then subtract all its grams from your total carbs. Sugar alcohols, except for erythritol, are not recommended for those on a FODMAP diet due to the digestive distress they can cause. And an important heads-up for all who might be dog guardians, please note xylitol is highly toxic to dogs. Don't leave it lying around.

INGREDIENT LISTS

Ingredients appear in order of their amounts in the product. The first ingredient is the largest by volume and the last, the smallest. Look to see where sugar ranks in the ingredient list. Remember its many names.

SUGAR BY SERVING SIZE

In 1993, the Federal Department of Agriculture mandated nutritional facts labeling on most packaged foods. Serving sizes were based on food consumption and intake surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Consumption has increased since then: super-sized fries, anyone? In 2016, the FDA required food labels to more accurately reflect consumption and food labels to state a serving size or how many servings per container. Labeled nutrition facts are always per serving size. Food manufacturers calculate small portions on purpose, so it's easy to glide right over this and eat more than one serving at a time. I'm always amazed to see a drink or packaged food list two or three servings for what would make sense to be a single serving. Pay attention.

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS

Don't substitute with artificial sweeteners. Most qualify as a chemistry experiment and can be worse for your health than a little bit of sugar. Try to kick the sweet habit, but if you must add a sweet touch to your coffee or tea, try some stevia or granulated monk fruit.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

My personal philosophy is any added sugar is too much, as we get plenty just eating food, but sometimes it's impossible or unrealistic to avoid all added sugars. It's hard to believe the daily recommendation by the American Heart Association is no more than 24 grams for women and 36 grams for men. Remember, that still equates to six teaspoons and nine teaspoons, respectively, which seems like a lot.

THE CHALLENGE

So how serious would you like to get about this? Think about committing to one of three levels below but choose the one you think you can succeed in, not the one your perfect self would select. Be realistic and take stock of where you are starting from, as any progress above that is good. You can always go to the next level after 30 days. Also, you don't want to create so much deprivation that it sends you binging in the other direction.

So here are your choices:

Level One: This is the easiest and most obvious. Give up sweets, deserts, candy, and sugary drinks, etc. In other words, obvious sugar that you can see, quickly taste, or add, such as to your coffee, tea, etc.

Level Two: Getting more serious here. All the above, plus now you are reading the labels and discovering and forgoing foods or drinks with high (and hidden) sugar content by all its names.

Level Three: Now, you're all in. All the above, plus give up the foods that quickly turn to sugar in the body, such as refined starches like breads, pastas, and/or high-glycemic foods. Eat low on the glycemic index which is a measure of how quickly a food can raise your blood sugar. Look up the glycemic index on the internet and you will see a list of foods and their glycemic values.

Bonus: Consider alcohol which can quickly turn to sugar in the body.

Some tips to get you through:

- Stay hydrated: Drink plenty of water. This will help you feel full throughout the day.
- Crowd out sweets by adding sweet foods like sweet potatoes, carrots, fruit, etc. to your diet.
- Engage your partner as a buddy or find a friend to do this challenge with you.
- Establish rewards along the way that are not food related.
- Experiment with tasty new recipes that are low in added sugar or avoid added sugar entirely.

Stay With It:

Depending on how much sugar you have been consuming—particularly if it has been a lot—you could experience mild to moderate unpleasant mental and physical symptoms ranging from depression, anxiety, brain fog, cravings headaches, fatigue, or dizziness. (If you are concerned about any side effects, consult your physician).

These side effects are largely due to the established fact that sugar leads to the release of dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter stimulating the pleasure-reward pathway. Find other ways you can reward yourself and seek out pleasurable, low sugar or non-sugar activities and foods that might offset this.

Overall, if you can decrease the amount of sugar in your diet, your prospects for a longer, healthier life will be better. Short-term challenges will be well worth the long-term benefits. This challenge is meant to set you on a healthier path and to improve your current awareness of just how much sugar is right for you. Remember moderation is the key long-term, so don't be too hard on yourself and, above all, pay attention to how you feel.

Here's to a healthy start to your 2023! 🍷

Note: This is not meant as medical advice. Please consult your professional practitioner for individual counsel particularly if you have pre-diabetes, diabetes, or any other medical conditions such as depression or current or previous disordered eating.