

Is Sugar Really Addictive?

Find out if there is any truth to sugar addiction, plus how to cut back

By [Denise Schipani](#) Posted April 13, 2009 from [Woman's Day](#); May 5, 2009

When I was a kid, I had a shoebox under my bed filled with wrappers from illicit candy. These days, though I no longer crave— or secretly eat—watermelon Jolly Ranchers or grape Bubble Yum, I still have a notorious sweet tooth. I often treat myself to a few York Peppermint Patties when I'm at the supermarket checkout, and I look forward to jelly beans at Easter and candy corn at Halloween. And don't get me started on dark chocolate.

Plenty of people (including me) swear they're addicted to sugar, but is their craving like that of a drug addict's? Maybe. "According to the FDA, in order for a substance to be an addiction, it has to cause a craving, be hazardous to your well-being, and even knowing that, you still use it," explains Allen Levine, PhD, director of the Minnesota Obesity Program at the University of Minnesota. "If you use that definition, then certain foods—say, sugary and fatty ones—could fit."

But experts say it's more likely that sweet cravings are a potent combination of nostalgia (the memory of Grandma's fresh-baked cookies as a special treat), habit (always having cake for dessert)—and, yes, a chemical attraction, which can be explained by the post-sugar rush you feel due to a spike in blood sugar and the release of feel-good hormones, like serotonin, in your brain. Eating sweet stuff just makes us happy.

People say they're addicted to sugar "because they have a hard time giving it up," says Dr. Levine. For some people, ditching it requires the same cognitive and behavior-modification skills that people need to stop smoking or drinking. In fact, research on rats shows that they had withdrawal symptoms, including shaking and teeth chattering, when the effects of the sugar water they'd had for nine days were blocked

Another reason former sweet-toothers are convinced they've beaten a true addiction: They feel so much better after kicking it. "If you've given up sugar, you've likely replaced it with healthy foods that give you real energy. Sugar doesn't energize; it can make you feel sluggish and fatigued," says Lona Sandon, RD, assistant professor of nutrition at UT Southwestern Medical Center, in Dallas, and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association (ADA).

Sweet Love

A preference for the sweet may well be inborn, a phenomenon probably linked to evolution. "Humans likely gravitated away from bitter foods, which might have been poisonous, and toward sweet ones, which were probably safe," says Sandon. Studies on infants have shown that babies will smile or coo after eating



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something sweet (their first food, breast milk, is highly sweet), and grimace or cry in response to a bitter flavor.

But we don't need sugar in a nutritional sense. "Sugar is a form of energy, or calories, and nothing else," says Audrey Cross, PhD, MPH, a retired professor from the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University in New York City. Of course, many good-for-us foods do contain quite a bit of natural sugar. Fruit is the best example—an apple or an orange floods your body with sugar, just as a lollipop does. But the candy has nothing else, whereas the fruit's sugar comes with vitamins, antioxidants and fiber. Although your body converts natural sugar (in an apple) and refined sugar (in a donut) to glucose, it will break down and process the sugar in the fruit more slowly, keeping your blood sugar (and energy) levels sustained rather than just giving you a quick boost, Dr. Cross explains.

So how could something that makes us feel good be *so* bad? The major damage happens when you eat too many foods with added sugar, which tend to be high in calories, and extra calories get stored as fat. This could lead to weight gain, which puts you at risk for various diseases, including diabetes. "It's a misconception that sugar itself causes diabetes," says Dr. Cross. "What happens is that excess weight can interfere with the body's ability to produce enough insulin to manage sugar intake."

Complicating the issue: Sugar's in a wide array of packaged and processed foods that we eat every day, and that has a profound effect on how we perceive sweetness. "One researcher did an analysis of recipes over time and found that some classics had less sugar a generation or more ago. I think part of the reason is that our preferences for how sweet something should taste have changed," notes Dr. Cross.

Still, you can eat refined sugar and have an overall healthy diet—but only in small amounts. The U.S. Dietary guidelines say that for 2,000 calories a day, you can have 32 grams of added sugar. That's not much: One cup of sweetened cereal can have up to 20 grams.

Break the habit: Cutting down the amount of sugar in your diet needn't be an all-or-nothing proposition.

Read labels: The first five ingredients listed make up the majority of any packaged food. If sugar in any form, is there, move on.

Watch what you drink: Go with juices labeled "100% juice" instead of "cocktail" or "punch," and mix with water or seltzer. Make your own unsweetened iced tea.

Pick homemade foods: Homemade foods tend to have less sugar. Take tomato sauce: You might add a dash of sugar to cut the tomatoes' acidity, but jarred brands often are loaded with sugar.

Alter recipes: "You can almost always cut the sugar by half in cookie or cake recipes without compromising flavor or texture," says Dr. Cross.

Write it down: You say you don't eat dessert, but have you counted the M&M's from the receptionist's desk? Keep a food diary for a week, and you'll uncover all sorts of easy-to-slash sweet stuff.

Go easy on the fakes: Artificial sweeteners can actually foster a taste for sweets. Cut down on them gradually to kick the habit.

Out of sight: Kids brought home candy from a party? Toss what they don't eat so you won't be tempted.

Retrain those taste buds: Is If you must have something sweet to round out a meal, try plain lowfat yogurt, a fruit cup packed in fruit juice (not syrup), or a piece of fresh fruit. Over time, if you get reaccustomed to the taste of healthful-but-sweet foods, you'll feel just as satisfied.