

# Shaking the Sugar Habit

Children's diets today contain enormous amounts of added sugars, which can ultimately contribute to obesity, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, tooth decay and numerous other ailments. These sugars can be obvious, as in sweetened sodas and candies, or hidden, as in many baked goods, ketchup, sauces and flavored yogurts.

Of course you don't want to banish birthday cakes or the occasional treats. Forbidding foods usually backfires. So where do you draw the line? Government guidelines recommend that 2- to 8-year-olds not exceed 4 to 5 teaspoons of added sugar daily- about a 75% reduction in what the typical child is eating now.

The following is a 4 week plan intended to gradually reduce the amounts of added sugars in your child's diet, replacing them with healthier, child friendly options.

## WEEK 1: Rethink what your kids drink

- Eliminate fruit drinks made with little or no juice. Replace them with 100% fruit juice, and limit servings for 1- to 6-year-olds to 4-6 ounces, and older kids 8-12 ounces daily.
- Sports drinks are unnecessary for the typical athletic child- they are best off drinking water, with a fruit snack if necessary at break time.
- Flavor milk yourself- ready flavored milks contain 3-5 added teaspoons of sugar per cup. Stir 1 tablespoon of Hershey's Lite Chocolate Syrup (with no artificial sweeteners) or Ovaltine into 1 cup of low-fat or skim milk. For vanilla milk, mix in 1 teaspoon of pure vanilla extract and 1 teaspoon of sugar.
- Buy better bubbles- limit soda to special occasions. For a healthier drink, mix ¼ cup juice (cherry, grape, pomegranate) into sparkling water, seltzer or club soda.
- Introduce water- after the 2 cups of low fat milk your child needs daily, water is the next best beverage. For younger kids, try a special new cup they can use just for cold water.

## WEEK 2: Downsize desserts and focus on fruit

- Children have been found to eat more candies when they are presented in a variety of colors as opposed to just one (i.e. M&Ms.) Use variety to your

advantage by serving fruit in multiple colors- mixing red and green grapes, berries, melons.

- Introduce the concept of “**eating a rainbow**”- trying to eat 5 different color fruits and/or vegetables a day. Older children can understand that different colors actually represent different vitamins provided by the fruits.
- Minimize dessert options, and try to avoid packaged items that tend to contain more saturated fats and added sugars. When purchasing such items, avoid the large “bargain size” bags- you’ll eat less. Better to limit cookies, cakes and the like to a few (or one day) a week (i.e. Fun Fridays), and try to make your own lower sugar versions.
- Offer healthy food- not a lecture; don’t make a big deal out of replacing old favorites. Just offer the healthier options, and one in a while alternate them with a sweet.
- Include your kids in the selection process- write down 10 dessert and 10 snack options, and put them on a rotation schedule (keeping healthier options more frequent.) When your child asks for cookies, you can show them they are on the schedule and will get them in the next few days for dessert.

### **WEEK 3: Stop rewarding & comforting with sweets**

- Head off the request- before your child has a chance to ask for a treat, tell him how proud you are of his accomplishment, or divert his attention if he needs comforting with a fun activity.
- Offer an alternative- switch to a different reward system (stickers, small toys, privileges, special attention.)
- Get everyone on board- try to get all the adults in your child’s life to avoid rewarding with sugar (teachers, grandparents, babysitters.)
- Limit any snacks to the table- no eating in front of the computer, television, or other sedentary activity.

### **WEEK 4: Search for sugar- even in unlikely places**

- Examine the ingredients list on any prepared foods- look for sugar, brown sugar, cane sugar, raw sugar, invert sugar, or beet sugar. Also look for less obvious sources of sugar- corn syrup, dextrose, evaporated cane juice, fructose, fruit juice

concentrates, galactose, glucose, honey, maltose, maltodextrin, maple syrup, molasses, and sucrose. Regardless of their source, ALL these ingredients are basically SUGAR.

- If you spot the added sugar in the ingredient list, look for the total amount of sugars, in grams, that the food contains. Divide the number of grams by 4 to convert the amount to teaspoons. If the product doesn't contain any milk or fruit, all the sugar is added.
- Compare sweetened items to artificially sweetened or unsweetened versions- look at plain yogurt vs. flavored yogurts, sweetened vs. unsweetened applesauce.
- Compare brands- there can be significant differences between tomato sauces, packaged breads, yogurts- try to select the brand with the least amount of added sugars, and try "weaning" your child off the sugary brands. If they are used to white breads, try a white whole grain bread and then brown whole grain. If they love colored, sugared yogurts, try a less sugary flavored brand before introducing plain yogurt with your own sweeteners (fruit, honey.) Replace sugared cereals with whole-grain, low sugar versions, but add a small amount of a favorite cereal on top (i.e. cheerios with a few fruit loops.)
- The FIVE GRAM RULE FOR CEREAL: get as close as you can to 5 grams of fiber, 5 grams of protein, and no more than 5 grams of sugar.
- CANNED FRUIT- look for fruit packed in water or juice, not heavy or light syrup
- YOGURT- avoid brands with more than 18 grams of sugar per serving, or candy add-ins.

Don't demonize sugar- one day your children will be on their own, and making their own decisions. If they are taught that sugars are bad, and are allowed no access to sweet foods, they will crave and overindulge when finally given the freedom to do so. More important is to introduce the tastes and flavors of naturally sweet foods, and teach children the concept of MODERATION. These are lessons that will last a lifetime.

### Does sugar cause hyperactivity?

This popular concept has not been proven. However, for many kids, a heavy dose of sugar or simple carbohydrate may cause a reactive hypoglycemia- a high followed by a sudden drop in blood sugar that can produce loss of concentration, lethargy and irritability. Best to give these children small frequent meals that contain some protein,

complex carbohydrate and healthy fat (all these components provide a slow steady release of energy and prevent sugar highs and lows.)