

Why Your Sweet Tooth is Bad for Your Heart

If you crave sweets after a savory meal, you know that enjoying too much sugar can add inches to your waist. Weight gain is clearly tied to added sugars. While you may not want to see extra pounds on the scale, the hidden damage to your heart is life-threatening.

Consuming added sugars raises the risk of developing heart disease, heart attacks, diabetes, high blood pressure, and stroke. Unmanaged cardiovascular issues can make it difficult to enjoy physical activity safely and lead to breathing challenges, heart failure, and premature death.

Not all sugar is added sugar.



Added sugars are simple carbohydrates added to processed, refined, and fast foods and sweetened drinks. They include cane sugar, honey, maple syrup, molasses, and agave and can be derived from sources like corn (corn syrup), plant leaves (Stevia and agave), sweet potatoes, monk fruit, and grains (like oats, rice, and wheat).

Whole plant foods like fruit (and 100% fruit juices), starchy and colorful vegetables, and whole grains also contain sugars, but these are naturally occurring and not considered added sugars. Processed dairy products without added sugars (like milk, yogurt, and cheese) also contain some naturally occurring sugar.

Eating whole foods does not have the same negative impact on heart health as eating packaged foods and drinks containing refined simple sugars derived from plants. Switching to lower-calorie sweeteners in coffee or desserts may reduce your total caloric intake to help you lose weight. But, it's unknown if such sweeteners are less damaging to the heart than refined cane sugar.

Why are added sugars so bad?

“The U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey identified a link between dietary sugar intake and death due to cardiovascular disease,” says Carl Orringer, M.D., a cardiologist specializing in preventive cardiology at the the University of Miami Health System. The study investigated the cardiovascular impact of sugars used in processed and prepared foods like sweetened beverages, grain-based desserts, fruit drinks (not real juice), dairy desserts, candy, ready-to-eat cereals, and yeast bread.

“The researchers reported a 30% higher risk for cardiovascular disease death in those who consumed 10 to 24% of their calories from added sugar, and a 275% higher risk in those who consumed 25% or more from added sugars when compared to those who consumed less than 10% of their calories from added sugars,” Dr. Orringer says.

“The reason behind this increased risk has not been clearly established, although it may be due to higher blood pressure, worsening of the blood triglyceride and

cholesterol levels, and increased blood vessel inflammation.”

According to research published in the medical journal *Circulation*, reducing our collective consumption of added sugars in packaged foods by 20% and in sweetened beverages by 40% could prevent 2.48 million strokes, heart attacks, and cardiac arrests; 490,000 cardiovascular deaths; and 750,000 new cases of diabetes in the United States.

Can you have your cake and eat it too?

You can reduce your cardiovascular risk, including quitting smoking, exercising more, maintaining a healthy weight, reducing stress, and getting better quality sleep. If sweet treats are a daily indulgence, the simplest goal may be to cut that out.

Gradually reduce your daily intake of added sugars, and replace them with naturally occurring sugars to help curb cravings. Eventually, your taste buds and your body will get used to consuming far less tooth-aching sweets.

Check all nutrition labels for the added sugar content. You'll find tons of added sugars hidden in your favorite blended coffee shop beverage, salad dressings, bread, cereal, yogurt, sauces, and frozen meals. A single serving with more than nine grams of added sugar is a lot. Opt for no-sugar-added peanut/almond butter, coffee creamers, non-dairy milk, and flavored carbonated water.

When you want something sweet, keep portion sizes in mind.

Reach for whole fruits first. Try pairing stone fruits (peaches, plums, nectarines) or berries with low-fat cottage cheese or yogurt. Blend up a real fruit smoothie.

Select grocery store and bakery treats sweetened only with natural fruit and sweeter veggies like:

- dates
- figs
- berries
- bananas
- raisins
- oranges
- pineapples
- carrots
- sweet potatoes

Naturally sweetened options include fruit pops and sorbets, oat and nut balls, and granola bars. When tasty treats are flavored with real vanilla, cocoa, cinnamon, coconut, cloves, berries, or citrus, you won't miss the sugar.

“In the end, behavior change is all about your readiness to accept and act on new information, regardless of whether or not you have established risk factors for heart disease,” says Dr. Orringer.

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