

What is a healthy snack?

Thanks to the recent revolution of school meals, we now expect our children to be fed a healthy, well balanced diet when they are at school. But if your child has a packed lunch it can be difficult to make it healthy and varied every day and it is time consuming to prepare. Knowing this, many food manufacturers now produce snack versions of their products, with portability in mind, marketed as 'handy packed lunch sized'.



The link between dietary fat, sugar and obesity is well known and when making healthy choices for ourselves and our families many of us consider the fat content of a product before buying, whilst overlooking the sugar content. Manufacturers often replace fat with sugar in order to compensate for the loss of flavour. They then market these products as 'low fat' and 'healthy choice' options.

Sugar is often found in high levels in products that may be considered healthy, like yoghurts, cereals and cereal bars. In a recent study 16 of the 30 cereal bars tested by Which contained more than 30% sugar, whilst 32 out of the 50 cereals they looked at also contained more than 30% sugar. In addition many of the yoghurt products marketed towards children have an average sugar level of around 14 grams per 100g. Moyra Cosgrove, Nutritionist from the Nutrition Society agrees,

'I believe that the food industry needs to take some responsibility, particularly where advertising to our children is concerned,' she says.

So why all the fuss?

Sugar and foods containing sugar are broken down into glucose when ingested and the glucose is released into the bloodstream. Moyra says,

'When you eat a high sugar food it is broken down very quickly and what you don't burn off will be converted into fat and stored. It is becoming increasingly recognised that sugary processed foods are a problem in terms of obesity.'

Our bodies have to work hard to bring the level of blood glucose back down to normal, especially when foods that are high in refined sugar are consumed.

To do this insulin is released into the blood stream, bringing the blood glucose level down. Excessive release of Insulin

Traffic light system for the labelling of sugar

Low
5g/100g or less

Med
5-12.5g/100g

High
12.5g/100g or more

What to look for

- Sucrose • Glucose • Fructose
- Maltose • Dextrose • Glucose
- Fructose • Syrup • Corn Syrup
- Maple • Syrup • Honey
- Molasses • Treacle
- Invert Sugar • Maltodextrin

Fuller for longer

The Glycaemic Index (GI) is a measure of the effect of different foods on blood sugar levels. Glucose has a GI value of 100 because it absorbed straight into the blood stream. The lower the value, the longer it takes for the food to be broken down, allowing blood sugar to be maintained at a steady level.

Tips

Swap breakfast cereals – some 'own brand' versions have less sugar, particularly 'value' options.

Sweeten no added sugar cereals or plain yoghurt with fruit (stewed or fresh) and a sprinkling of cinnamon.

Buy canned fruit in own juice.

Swap fizzy drinks for unsweetened fruit juice and dilute with water. Swap white rice, white bread and white pasta for whole grain varieties, as refined grains have a similar effect to glucose when they are eaten.

Consider other options than a cereal bar for a treat, for example, 2 plain biscuits like Malted Milk or Rich Tea contain less sugar than a cereal bar.

Berries such as blueberries, strawberries and raspberries are an alternative sweet treat for lunch boxes.

A protein-based sandwich using half white bread/half wholemeal is a good compromise.



Find an alternative

Agave nectar, extracted from the Blue Webber Agave plant, is a low GI alternative to refined sugar and maple syrup.

Fruit sugar is available as an alternative to refined sugar. It has a low GI and is sweeter, so you need a third less.

causes hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar) and our bodies are fooled in to thinking we need more sugar, a so-called sugar craving. Other symptoms include exhaustion and poor concentration. Intake of more sugar leads to a yo-yo effect with sugar levels rising and falling. This puts a strain on the body and in the long term can lead to Type-2 Diabetes.

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Tips

Cereals often have different nutrient information on the front of the box to that found on the back. This is because the information on the front is for a portion of dry cereal, as opposed to the information on the back, which gives nutrient content per portion with semi-skimmed milk. As a guide, 1 teaspoon of sugar is approximately 5 grams.

So what can we do?

It is important to keep blood sugar levels steady throughout the day.

'Complex carbohydrates, such as wholegrain foods, in combination with protein will help keep blood sugar levels steady,' says Moyra 'and it is really important not to skip breakfast.'

- Check food labels and make informed choices.
- Think about alternative snacks and ways of sweetening foods.
- Cut down on sugar intake gradually.
- Making small changes is a positive step in the right direction and one that will benefit the whole family.