Sugar

I’ve been reading quite a bit lately about sugar. It is a common topic on diet and nutrition blogs, especially lately. Many of us are coming down from a holiday sugar high, just in time to head into Valentine’s Day, featuring more sugar. The 2010 dietary guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture warn us to reduce our consumption of sugar to preserve our waistlines and our health. This is often a real challenge and yet being diligent will offer far-reaching rewards that may not be easily seen.

Americans consume an average of 152 pounds of sugar a year — an increase of 30 pounds compared to two decades ago, according to the USDA. But at the same time we have cut back a bit since 1991. We have been blaming that increase on sweetened beverages and eating out, but according to a National Health and Nutrition data survey from 2005–2008, more sugar was consumed at home. It states, “Slightly more than one-half of the added sugars calories from beverages were consumed at home (54 percent), while nearly two-thirds of the added sugars consumed from foods were consumed at home (66 percent).”

It sounds like we should look to our own refrigerators and pantries to pare down sugar consumption. Realizing the sugars in sweetened beverages is easy, but many foods we eat contain more sugar than we may realize, especially if it is considered a savory food such as condiments like ketchup and salad dressings, prepared foods, fried foods (sugar helps attain the golden brown color), breakfast foods, snack foods and desserts.

By the time we get to dessert, we may have already eaten as much or more sugar than a dessert. The Mayo Clinic says most Americans consume about 22 teaspoons of sugar daily. Time to read some more labels and ingredient lists. Anything that has an “ose” on the end is a form of sugar, for example, maltose, dextrose, fructose, etc. Corn syrup, maple syrup, cane sugar, agave, honey, molasses, maltodextrin — all are forms of that sweet taste we love.
Sugar has more far-reaching effects than the immediate energy burst, burn and drain. Here are a few things to think about. We know about tooth decay. But tooth decay can lead to gum disease and gum disease can lead to inflammation of the coronary arteries. Imbalanced blood glucose can lead to mood swings, fatigue and headaches. The December Health and Nutrition newsletter from Tufts University features a study linking higher blood glucose levels with dementia. “We found that higher glucose levels were associated with an increased risk of dementia in populations with and without diabetes,” says Dr. Paul K. Crane of the University of Washington and colleagues.

Sugar is being linked to obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Consuming sweet, nutrient-deficient foods don’t leave us much room for nutrient-dense foods. And it seems the more sweets we eat, the more we crave them. Crazy cycle. Ever feel stressed and irritable after too many sweets? Sugar can also affect our cognition or our mind’s ability to learn. It can affect how we look! When we eat too much sugar, a process called glycation can occur, where some of the sugar we consume sticks to the proteins in our body, causing our body tissues to lose their elasticity. It can affect our skin and our internal organs. The faster the body loses its elasticity, the faster aging occurs.

How much is too much? Some doctors say any amount is too much. The American Heart Association recommends that women consume no more than 6 teaspoons of added sugar every day. And men should consume less than 9 teaspoons per day. That's about 100 and 150 calories for women and men, respectively.

Good luck at curbing your sugar cravings, especially walking by all the Valentine’s Day displays at the stores. Try to think of the health of your heart rather than those chocolate hearts.

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