



Be sweet to your Heart

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February is American Heart Month. In the nutrition world, we typically focus the heart healthy conversation around reducing saturated fat (another article for another day) but this month we're going to focus on sugar. Eating added sugar excessively can lead to an increased risk for heart disease along with obesity, type 2 diabetes, and increased inflammation which can all also increase the risk for heart disease.

First thing's first, we're talking about ADDED sugars and not ALL sugars. Here is the difference. Added sugars are sugars and syrups added to foods during preparation or processing or at the table. This type of sugar provides energy and very little nutrients. Natural sugar is found naturally in our food like fruit and milk. Along with energy from the sugar, we get an abundance of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and protein. The benefit of eating foods with natural sugar far outweigh the risk of the increased sugar you're eating with these foods. It's the added sugars we want to focus on reducing in our diet.

Added sugars are found predominantly in sweetened beverages such as lemonade, sweetened tea, juice "drinks" and regular pop. Cakes, cookies, candy, ice cream and other desserts are high in added sugar. Added sugars are also in some commonly eaten foods that we wouldn't necessarily think of as sugary foods. Ketchup, BBQ sauce, some salad dressings, and canned tomato products can be surprisingly high in added sugar.

It's important to note that added sugar isn't just cane sugar but also honey, raw sugar, agave nectar among other sweeteners. Here are some common ingredients used as sweeteners to look for when reading the ingredient list on a product to identify added sugars: brown sugar, corn sweetener, corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, glucose, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, lactose, malt syrup, maltose, molasses, raw sugar, and sucrose.

How much is "excessive" when eating added sugars? The American Heart Association recommends limiting added sugar to 9 teaspoons (36 grams) a day for men and 6 teaspoons (25 grams) a day for women or less than 10% of your total calories coming from added sugar. It's easy to go above that with 16.5 teaspoons in a 20oz regular cola and about 1 teaspoon in 1 Tablespoon of ketchup! The new nutrition facts label lists grams of added sugars per serving (find it under total sugars) to make it easy to figure out how much added sugar is in a product.

While I typically do not think it's necessary to count grams of added sugar, I do think it's good to read labels for a bit to become aware of what the biggest sources of added sugars are in your diet. That doesn't mean you need to completely cut those foods out, remember the goal is not 0g added sugar but a reduced amount, but that gives you a direction of what foods to eat a smaller portion of or reduce how often you eat them to cut back on the amount of added sugars in your diet. One tip is to replace some of the dessert foods you eat with fruit. You get that sweet taste without any of the added sugars and a TON of nutritional benefit. Every little bit of added sugars you can take out of your diet counts and your heart will thank you!