

ARE YOU ADDICTED TO SUGAR?

We've all done it, reached for the biscuit or chocolate for a lift. But research suggests excess sugar could be deadlier than fat and as addictive as heroin. So, are you hooked?



Who doesn't love something sweet, now and then? And if you can't indulge in the Quality Street at Christmas, when can you? The problem is that sugar now accounts for a fifth of our total calorie intake. And, apparently, it's women more than men who are turning to sweet snacks. Not just because sugar tastes good and lifts our mood and energy, but it also helps us cope with stress and long working hours.

'Even if you don't think you have a sweet tooth, sugar is being sneaked into a whole range of foods,' explains Laila Lewis, nutritional therapist at The Nutrition Coach (thenutritioncoach.co.uk). A recent *Which?* report found that certain savoury foods contain more sugar than ice cream. Over the past 30 years, food manufacturers have doubled the amount of sugar they add to their products – replacing the fat content we've all been so worried about with sugar in low-fat alternatives. That's the sucrose, fructose, glucose, maltose, hydrolysed starch and corn syrup on the label.

Why sugar is so addictive

The chemicals released by eating sugar travel the same brain pathways as heroin, say scientists. Cheap sweeteners such as high-fructose corn syrup, used in everything from cakes to soft drinks, can

also suppress leptin, the hormone that carries the 'stop now, you're full' message to the brain – so you never really feel sated.

How does it affect our bodies?

'All forms of sugar (eg, honey, syrups, white/brown sugar, etc) are "fast releasing" and have the highest glycaemic index or glycaemic load (GI or GL),' says Laila Lewis. 'White bread, rice and pasta are also relatively fast-releasing carbohydrates. This means they are digested very quickly and cause a sudden and rapid rise in blood-sugar levels. The body then responds by releasing a hormone called insulin to "remove" the sugar from the blood which can, in turn, cause a sudden drop. Because you then feel lethargic and tired, you crave more fast-releasing foods to give you energy. This is when you are more likely to reach for quick fixes like chocolate or an iced bun.'

Unfortunately, if the sugar is not needed for immediate energy it's ultimately stored as body fat and, over time, your body becomes less sensitive to the continual peaks in insulin levels, causing long-term problems such as type 2 diabetes.

Why sugar is so toxic







US scientists have branded sugar as poisonous as cigarettes and alcohol. 'As well as causing obesity,' says Laila Lewis, 'sugar changes your metabolism, raises blood pressure and harms the liver. It affects every organ in the body in a negative way.'

According to dermatologist Dr Nicholas Perricone, an authority on diet and ageing, it also leads to premature ageing.




'Sugar molecules attach to collagen fibres, creating a chemical reaction that makes skin vulnerable to sun damage and sagging.'

'Even if you don't have a sweet tooth, sugar is sneaked into savoury foods'

Can you believe the hidden

sugar in this lot? Bear in mind we shouldn't eat more than 10tsp (50g) a day

Do the quiz...

- Do you eat white bread, rice and pasta every day?
- Do you reward yourself with a sweet treat, like a cake, a few biscuits or a chocolate bar?
- Do you feel tired and irritable mid-morning and mid-afternoon but, after you've had a sweet treat, feel better?
- Do you usually buy biscuits, sweets and/or cakes as part of your weekly shop?
- Have you ever taken a small bite of something sweet and felt compelled to finish the whole thing?
- Do you eat sweet foods to change your mood, like when you feel sad, tired, or when you need a lift?
- Do you usually have dessert, even if you're full after your main course?
- Have you tried to limit sugary foods in your diet, but failed?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, then you're addicted to sugar to some degree. Yikes!

Tip Avoid hidden sugar by always reading the label. Anything with less than 5g sugar per 100g is low sugar, while anything above 15g per 100g is high.

REAL WOMEN LIKE YOU

'After I cut out sugar I felt so much better'

Jan Shure, 60, is a married mum of two and co-founder of fashion website sosensational.co.uk.



'I used to take sugar in coffee and was a big dessert lover, but I changed my diet a few years ago after I developed gastritis out of the blue. After Googling it, I discovered that some experts thought sugar might be an aggravating factor. It wasn't easy and took me about three weeks to cut out added sugar, but I found that I felt a lot better. I also lost a few pounds and my skin was glowing. I now avoid cakes, biscuits, desserts, ice-cream and sugary drinks, and I no longer get blood-sugar dips, as my energy levels are more on an even keel.'

HOW TO KICK THE HABIT

Break the cycle to balance your blood sugar, says Laila Lewis...

Eat regularly Missing meals will lead to low energy, cravings and may slow your metabolism.

Reduce the glycaemic load/index (GL/GI) of your food. Avoid white, light, sweet or 'fluffy' foods (white rice, bread and pasta, cakes and processed breakfast cereals). And choose wholemeal rice, bread and pasta, porridge, oatcakes, etc.

Eat your '5-a-day' but choose vegetables over fruit, which is high in fruit sugar. Pick UK fruit (eg, apples) rather than tropical fruit (eg, mango), which are very high in sugar.

Eat a moderate amount of protein with every meal or snack, as it releases sugars into your blood stream more slowly so you don't get hungry. Good choices are poultry, eggs, houmous, beans and nuts.

Avoid stimulants Tea, coffee, chocolate, cola, alcohol and cigarettes all raise stress hormones, which increases blood-sugar levels.

Cut down gradually Try to halve your added sugar intake each week if you take it in drinks, until you have none. After six weeks your palate will return to its natural state and be more sensitive to sweetness.

Exercise! Even five minutes brisk walking helps your body to react in a healthy way to insulin and obviously helps with weight management.

The mineral chromium can help stabilise blood-sugar levels. It can be found in broccoli, cheese, dried beans and chicken, so eat plenty.

Stay on the wagon. Sugar cravings can return, so make sure your intake doesn't creep up again. If you want a sweet treat, buy snack size chocolate bars and biscuits.

FEATURE: MICHELLE O'CONNOR; PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK; IPC IMAGES