

# Sugar:

## the where, why, and how of eating less

It's fair to say that sugar is a hot topic, and it's not about to become yesterday's fish and chip paper any time soon. A quick Google search reveals more than 26 million hits for sugar-related news. But just how much sugar should we be eating, why should we eat less, where is it hiding, and what can we do about it?

### How much sugar should we be eating?

The World Health Organization (WHO) supports countries to meet their health objectives. The WHO recommends we reduce intake of free sugars to less than 10% of dietary energy with a further recommendation to reduce intake below 5% for additional health benefits\*. You can relax a little... we are not talking about the sugar in whole fruit here. Free sugars are those added to foods and beverages by the cook, consumer, or manufacturer, and sugars naturally present in honey, syrups, fruit juices, and fruit concentrates.

For an average adult, 10% of daily energy equates to 12 teaspoons of sugar per day, or 6tsp if you're aiming for the gold standard 5%. One teaspoon of sugar weighs in around 4g. A 350mL glass of orange juice contains around 8½ teaspoons, and that spread of honey on your morning toast contributes another two teaspoons, so you can see it isn't hard to clock up 11 teaspoons of your daily allowance before mid-day; by dinner you could easily reach 12 teaspoons of sugar just by eating foods commonly consumed by many Kiwis. Before we move onto tips for reducing dietary sugar though we should question – why would we want to? What effect might too much sugar have on our health?

### Why should we eat less sugar?

The WHO guideline was based on an update of all the evidence linking sugar and health. The evidence tells us free sugars encourage weight gain and diabetes, and we already know that lower sugar diets make for more stable blood sugar. For those of us managing these conditions already it is even more important to reduce sugar to stay healthy for longer.

A national nutrition survey found New Zealand adults consume on average 107g of total sugar per day (around 20% of total dietary energy). Researchers are working on the proportion of this we can attribute to free sugar, but with two of the top three dietary sources being beverages and sweets, it is fair to guess that we, as a nation, are consuming too much of the white stuff.





## Where is sugar hiding?

The good news is that with a few simple tips one can avoid most free sugars in the supermarket aisle. Let's take a look at where we find sugar lurking in the supermarket aisle. There are of course the obvious contributors such as chocolate, ice cream, cakes, pastries, and biscuits, but we also find sugar in some less well-known places – think breakfast cereals, baked beans, muesli or cereal bars, and even cooking and table sauces (yes, even the old Kiwi favourite tomato sauce – see the table below).

## Sugar content of common Kiwi foods\*

Food	Examples	Average sugar per 100 mL/g	Average serve size	Average tsp sugar per serve
Regular Orange Juices	Keri, Just Juice, Golden Circle	~8g	200mL	~3.8 tsp
Lower Sugar Orange Juices	Charlie's, Just Juice	~4g	200mL	~2 tsp
Canned Beans in Tomato Sauce	Wattie's, Homebrand, Pam's, Oak	~7g	210g (½ can)	~3.75 tsp
Plain Vanilla Biscuits	Griffin's, Arnott's, Budget	~21g	20g (2 biscuits)	1.0 tsp
Muesli Bars with fruit	Pam's, Flemming's, Nice & Natural	27g	30g (1 bar)	2.0 tsp
Baked Fruit Cereal Bars	Weight Watchers, Pams, Homebrand	30g	25g (1 bar)	1.9 tsp
Regular (untoasted) Muesli	Pam's, Sanitarium, Alison Holst	~7 to 22g	50g	~1 tsp to 2.75 tsp
Cereals with Flakes and Fruit	Healtheries, Pam's, Kellogg's, Uncle Toby's	25g	40g	2.5 tsp
Satay Cooking Sauces	Wattie's, Kan Tong, Maggi	~9g	100g	~2.25 tsp
Tomato Sauces	Wattie's, Oak, Greggs	~20g	15g (1Tlbspn)	~0.8 tsp

\*data collected in 2015 from packaged foods in supermarkets in Auckland

~ denotes approximate amount

## What can we do about our sugar intake?

It is helpful to know that most free sugars are found in packaged and processed foods. Therefore, to avoid sugar we can focus our shop around the outside of the supermarket where all the fresh whole foods are found – fresh fruit and veg, meat, and fish for example. In the inner aisles we can focus on foods which we recognise as being in their natural form - eggs, nuts, rolled oats, rice etc. Of course fresh foods require cooking from scratch. On the one hand this is great because it allows us to control the amount of sugar that goes in, but on the other many of us are time poor or have other reasons as to why cooking isn't possible. If that's you then check out the back of the pack and compare products – some will be much lower in sugar than others. There is even a free smartphone app called FoodSwitch, that can help. Foods that are promoted as being lower in sugar are also hitting our shelves and can be healthier options. For example, Watties now has a tomato sauce product with less sugar and less salt. The Heart Foundation recommends giving children water as their main drink, using sweet foods only for special occasions, and using fruit rather than sugar for sweetness – all sensible ideas.

It's easy to eat too much sugar because it doesn't satisfy hunger very well. There is no problem with eating sugary foods occasionally, but our environment doesn't make this easy. Everywhere we look there is sugar - fast food restaurants, dairies, at the checkout, at the movies... Changing our environment is possible. In other countries Governments have introduced policies such as taxes on sugar sweetened beverages (Mexico, Hungary, Finland, and France), prevention of the marketing of sugary foods to children, and guidelines for school food. The Mexican sugary drinks tax reduced sales of targeted beverages by ~6%, and the UK has just announced a sugary drinks tax from 2018, with the funding going to boost primary school sports. A tax on sugar clearly isn't a solution on its own, but could play an important part in reducing sugar intake and overweight, alongside other interventions.



Reducing dietary sugar helps us maintain a healthy body weight, control blood sugar, and preserve long-term good health. By focusing on whole, unprocessed foods and choosing lower sugar processed food options we can achieve a tasty and low sugar diet. However, for many of us it's not easy, and our environment makes it that much harder.

*Dr Helen Eyles – Public Health Nutrition, University Of Auckland*

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