

Sugars: Natural versus added ^[1]

Alice,

I have a family history of diabetes, so I try and control my sugar intake. I am having a lot of trouble figuring out how much sugar is the maximum amount of sugar to allow in my diet. I have read that "added sugar" intake should be limited to no more than ten percent of your daily calories, but I have no idea how to determine what amount of sugar in food is natural versus added. I assume that all sugars in fresh fruits, vegetables and non-processed meats/poultry/fish and dairy are natural, and those should be excluded from the ten percent max. And, I also am assuming that any sugars found in any other products ? for example, the protein powder, almond milk or coconut cream I use in my morning smoothies, and packaged foods and condiments of any type ? should be counted against the ten percent. But, I don't know whether any of these assumptions are correct, and I have no idea what my total amount of sugars ? natural and added ? should be in any given day. I try to stay under 35 grams per day, but that can be very difficult for me to do each day without carefully monitoring the nutritional content of every food using a food tracking application. That gets exhausting! Can you provide some guidance on this?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You're taking a proactive approach to your health, sweet! Deciphering what's considered an "added sugar" isn't always easy and may leave folks with a sour outlook. "Added" or "free sugars" refer to those that are added to foods and beverages by a manufacturer, cook, or consumer; there are a variety of sugars (more on that later), making them more difficult to identify. And, you're right, Reader, recommendations for added sugar intake range from 5 to 15 percent of your total caloric intake and the general consensus rests at about ten percent or less. You're also correct that naturally occurring sugars, such as those found in fruits, vegetables, and non-processed foods aren't considered a source of added sugar. Processed foods, on the other hand, such as protein powder or coconut milk, likely have added sugar and would count toward the daily recommendations. Though they are found in different sources, it may interest you to know that the body processes both added and natural sugars the same way. A significant difference here is that natural sugars usually come from foods that provide added nutritional benefits such as fiber, vitamins, and minerals. If you're concerned about high sugar intake, though, there's no need to fret ? a few healthy lifestyle habits may help keep your sugar intake in check.

Added sugars are those used to enhance the flavor of foods; for example, the almond milk you use in your smoothies may have added sugars that you don't notice unless you take a look at the [nutrition label](#) [2] or ingredients list. Sugar goes by many names, so a helpful hint is to look out for ingredients ending in *-ose*, such as fructose, glucose, maltose, and dextrose. You might also look for ingredients such as molasses, corn syrup, honey, and agave while you're at it. Any of these can indicate added sugar in your food product. You may also find it handy to know that some chain restaurants are required to list their food's nutrition information, which includes overall sugar content. This may be useful when planning ahead for times you'll need to grab some grub on the go.

Now, turning to the natural stuff. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) doesn't specify how much natural sugar is ideal, but does provide [recommendations](#) [3] on how much of each food group to aim for each day. To make sugar tracking less tedious and time consuming, check out the nifty [USDA Food-A-pedia Supertracker](#) [4] tool! This tool may give you a general sense of natural versus added sugar levels so you can spend less time monitoring on a daily basis. If you're growing weary of logging your food here are some lifestyle tips you may want to try to help keep your sugar intake low and your motivation high:

- Choose water or other calorie-free drinks instead of sugary sodas or sports drinks. Watch out for the added sugar in blended coffee drinks as well.
- If a juice craving strikes, opt for 100 percent fruit juice instead of juice drinks that have added sugar. For some added nutritional value, eat the fruit rather than drink the juice to get the fiber!
- Beware of making breakfast a sugary start to the day. Although breakfast cereals can contain added sugar to make them more appealing to children, skip the non-nutritious, sugary, and frosted cereals.
- Consider trying reduced-sugar varieties of syrups, jam, jellies and preserves, and use other condiments such as salad dressing and ketchup sparingly. If you're buying canned fruit, try packed in water or juice, not syrup. If needed, you can give the syrup-packed fruit a good rinse to eliminate some of the added sugar.
- Want a nutritious nosh? Snack on vegetables, nuts, fruits, low-fat cheese, whole-grain crackers, and low-fat, low-calorie yogurt. You might take a pass on the candy, pastries and, cookies.
- Feast on fresh foods! When possible, choose non-processed and whole foods such as fruits and vegetables.

List adapted from the [Mayo Clinic](#) [5].

Diets high in added sugars may lead to a slew of [health issues](#) [6], including an increased risk of diabetes. The risk for [type 2 diabetes](#) [7], specifically, increases when there is high caloric intake from **any** food source, especially when coupled with inactivity. Adopting a healthy lifestyle that includes balanced eating and regular physical activity may be your best bet when it comes to prevention ? for more info take a look at [Is it true that eating too many carbohydrates can cause diabetes?](#) [8] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archives. If sugar's still got you stumped, you may also find it helpful to speak with your health care provider or a registered dietician.

Alice!

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