

Is Sugar Unhealthy for Children?

As public health dietitians, we know sugar can be a charged topic. We all want the best for our kids and don't want to cause harm. How do we approach the hot topic of sugar when thinking about children's health?

What is sugar?

Sugar is a type of carbohydrate that is either naturally occurring or added to food and drinks. All carbohydrates are broken down into sugar in our bodies, and used as our main fuel, including for brain and muscle function.

What is the difference between "sugar", "added sugar", and "free sugar"?

Honey, syrup, brown sugar, white sugar, fruit juice, and fruit concentrates are examples of added sugars or naturally occurring free sugars that are found in drinks and foods. Added and free sugar can enhance the flavour, texture, colour, and thickness of foods.

There are some very nutritious foods that contain naturally occurring sugar which include those found in fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruit and vegetables (fructose) as well as plain milk and yogurt (lactose). These foods have nutrients that most people often don't get enough of and can help children eat well.

Is added sugar unhealthy?

No one food alone is unhealthy. Having a sugary drink such as pop once in a while won't affect overall health. However when sweet foods, and especially sweet drinks, replace other nutritious foods often, it can increase the risk of health problems over time. If we provide a variety of foods for children to choose from within a routine structure of meals and snacks, they can develop the skills to eat well in the long run.

How does sugar fit into children's diets?

Sweet foods can bring great pleasure and are often a part of celebrations and traditions. When we don't allow children to eat some sweets, they can develop food cravings, which can contribute to higher stress levels and feelings of shame or guilt. This can lead to unhealthy habits and disordered eating. So, it isn't a good idea to cut out sugar completely.

Is sugar the problem?

If we take an approach that [all foods are available](#), it removes the power and value of this single ingredient. If you notice adverse effects of sugar on children, ask yourself whether perhaps there's something else going on. Sometimes we think sugar is the problem when actually our child is tired, dehydrated, overwhelmed, or isn't being offered a variety of foods at meals and snacks.

What about sugar substitutes?

There are no proven health benefits associated with the intake of sugar substitutes (such as aspartame, sucralose, acesulfame k, xylitol and stevia). Promote nutritious unsweetened foods and beverages instead.



Is dried fruit the same as fresh fruit?

Unsweetened dried fruit is more dense than fresh fruit because the water has been removed during the dehydration process. Both contain naturally occurring sugar and are nutritious foods but because of its sticky texture, dried fruit can contribute to dental decay, so offer it along with other non-sweet foods such as seeds, nuts, or plain yogurt.

What about carbonated and fruit-flavoured water?

Carbonated and unsweetened herb or fruit-flavoured water are low-sugar drink choices but they are also acidic, which can contribute to tooth decay in kids. They are a great option to serve occasionally at meals and snacks.

How do I talk about sugar with kids?

When talking about foods with added sugar, aim to refer to them in the same way as other foods. We may offer sweet foods in smaller amounts than other foods, but we can still describe them as “food” instead of “bad” or “junk” foods. If you use rewards, aim for [non-food rewards](#). When we reward with “treat food”, it can lead to children eating more of those foods in the long run.

How do I strike a balance around sugar with kids?

Include sweets at some meals and snacks so they don't become taboo:

- find out more about [how to use sweets with children](#)

Include plain water between meals and snacks:

- Send a water bottle to school

Offer children drinks from these choices at meals and snacks:

- water, plain milk, unsweetened fortified soy beverage

Aim for [good oral care](#):

- brush teeth twice a day using fluoride toothpaste

Schedule meal and snacks during the day:

- a [regular routine and structure](#) helps children eat better



Sugar doesn't have to be the only focus if we can emphasize offering children a variety of foods from [Canada's food guide](#) to provide them with the nutrients they need to grow, play, and learn.

Looking for a tasty snack idea?

[These pumpkin muffin bars](#) can be on the plate in less than 40 minutes. Consider inviting kids in the kitchen to bake. They often surprise us with how much they can do on their own and how much fun it can be. Plus, they're more likely to eat what they helped cook!



If you have any specific questions about your child's nutrition, you can contact HealthLinkBC at 8-1-1 to speak to a registered dietitian or [email a HealthLinkBC dietitian](#).