

How Sweet It's Not

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The modern food world is sweet, too sweet. The picture at right shows the equivalent amount of sugar in a large milkshake from a popular fast food restaurant.

If your reaction is “yuck!”, it’s the right one.

Of all the foods in the modern diet, refined sugar is one of the most health-damaging and pervasive. It is also remarkably addictive, and when consumed in excess, it wreaks havoc on body chemistry and can devastate your immune system.

Dietary sugar has been implicated in:

- allergies, anxiety issues, arthritis;
- blood sugar problems, diabetes;
- fatigue, mood issues;
- chronic inflammation;
- heart disease, obesity; and
- weakened bones, reduced tissue elasticity and many other disorders.

These conditions do not build healthy, fit, clear-thinking soccer players. I have yet to have a client who hasn’t dramatically benefitted both on and off the field, from reducing sugar intake.

Dietary sugar can be “natural,” like that found in fruit, or “added,” like that found in non-diet soda and cake frosting. When consumed in moderation in its natural form (such as whole fruit), sugar can be a healthy source of energy. However, if you consume large amounts of added sugar, your health and soccer performance will be far less than what it could be.



In a Nutshell

- Excess sugar devastates the immune system and impairs health and soccer performance.
- Read food labels – a lot of sugar is “hidden” in everyday food and drink.
- There are 4 grams of sugar per teaspoon.
- Avoid artificial sweeteners.
- Choose healthier alternatives to high fructose corn syrup and white sugar.
- One you break the “habit” you will feel better for it.

“As a kid, I ate so much sweet cereal that I used a cooking pot instead of a bowl to avoid having to go back for refills. I also suffered from debilitating chest colds at least four times a year, pimples galore and chronic muscle injuries. When I finally got smart and cut sugar from my diet, the chest colds stopped, my skin cleared and my injury problems faded away.”

Everyday food and drink can be loaded with added sugar. For example, there can be up to 14 teaspoons of sugar in one can of non-diet soda, and one cup of breakfast cereal can contain up to 6 teaspoons.

The American Heart Association recommends that adult men and women limit added-sugar consumption to nine and six teaspoons per day, respectively. Just one can of soda or sweet tea blasts past those limits.

You may be surprised to know that many young soccer players regularly consume 50 to 70 teaspoons of sugar per day, much of it from sweet drinks. That's adds up to about 220 pounds per year!

You don't have to be a nutrition expert to know that's a health and soccer performance disaster!

Food labels show sugar content in grams per serving. To calculate the number of teaspoons of sugar, divide the number of grams by four. Note: there can be multiple servings in a container of food and drink.

By now, you may be thinking about switching to artificial sweeteners instead of sugar. Don't. Artificial sweeteners have a very controversial health history. Here are just a few of the common complaints reported by users of artificial sweeteners:

- headache, anxiety, breathing difficulty;
- fatigue, depression, dizziness, seizures;
- insomnia, irritability, muscle and joint pain; and
- weight gain (opposite from what you might think but true).

One common artificial sweetener, aspartame, has been linked to brain and neurological damage and an increase in the risk of brain tumors in children. (Blaylock, R.L. *Excitotoxins: The Taste That Kills*. New Mexico: Health Press, 1997.)

Artificial sweeteners are found in low-calorie, diet and sugar-free products and many processed foods. Unless artificial sweeteners are required for a medical condition, they should be avoided until proven safe over the long term.

Raw sugar, raw honey, pure maple syrup and Stevia are healthier alternatives to high fructose corn syrup and white sugar. However, they should still be used in moderation. Note: Honey should not be given to babies under one year of age.

You may go through a withdrawal of sorts when you stop consuming excess sugar but once you get the sweet food and drink out of your diet for a few weeks, your taste buds will reset themselves and your cravings for sweets will diminish.



A 110 pound player next to 220 pounds of sugar

Here are some simple tips to reduce daily sugar consumption:

- Stop or minimize the consumption of sweet drinks such as soda, sweet coffee and tea, milk shakes and most commercial juices. They typically account for more than half of daily sugar intake.
- Sport drinks are high in sugar and should not be consumed as a casual beverage. (These will be discussed in more detail in a future article.)
- Fruit is nature's sweet. Make it yours too. Fruit has energy plus the fiber and nutrients to process that energy.
- If you want fruit juice, eat the whole fruit. Most commercial juices are loaded with sugar but lack the nutrients and fiber to go with it.
- A squeeze of lemon or lime in water makes a flavorful, refreshing, sweet-drink replacement.
- Read food labels to determine how much sugar is in food. Note: If the sugar content is low but the product tastes sweet, it probably contains an artificial sweetener.
- When baking, you can often halve the sugar in most recipes with little effect on the outcome.

Don't obsess about sugar but do be smart about it. Minimizing the amount of added sugar you eat and drink is an easy way to dramatically boost your health and soccer performance.

Until next time – Be well, Play well.

About the Author

Curt Thompson is a practicing nutritionist and the author of the *Soccer Nutrition Handbook* (www.NutritionCoaches.com). He is also a nationally licensed soccer coach and runs the Advanced Training Program at FC Boulder in Colorado.