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Guest Column with Julie Meek

Julie Meek is a Perth-based nutritionist, dietitian and peak performance expert who is also the resident dietitian on Radio 6PR. In this column, Julie helps us take a close look at sugar and gives us her 5 best tips to keep sugar intake levels low.

Sugar – is it all the same?

These days a popular way of labelling desserts and sweet snacks that you might find in café's, restaurants and especially on social media, is 'refined sugar free.' This is an extremely misleading term as there are often other sources of 'natural' sugar in the recipes or products. These other sources could be rice malt syrup, agave syrup, maple syrup, and honey or coconut sugar. They are all sugar and all 'natural' but still contain calories. And yes, although from a different source, honey and cane sugar are both sugars and contain the same amount of energy and calories.

There are obvious sources of refined sugar that we know about such as cakes, muffins, lollies, chocolate and biscuits but sugar, refined or otherwise can easily be hidden in products like soft drinks, energy drinks, cordials, fruit juices and alcohol.

What about sugar-free?

It is virtually impossible to eat a sugar free diet (nor is it necessary) but it is possible to eat less of the high glycemic index carbohydrates that are refined and low in fibre. If we reduce our intake of these and focus on the high fibre, wholegrain carbohydrates, it is much more difficult to overeat these as their volume is far greater helping us feel fuller for longer.

Will cutting down on sugar lead to weight loss?

For some people, reducing their sugar intake when it has been in excess of need will usually lead to weight loss. However, it is often not one single thing (i.e. sugar) in our diets that improves our health and encourages weight loss - it's a combination of choosing healthy fats, decreasing excessive calorie intake, increasing vitamins and minerals or getting more fibre and exercising more.

What is an acceptable amount of sugar in your diet?

When choosing food, look for products that contain 10g or less of sugar per 100g serve of the food. If we are consistently choosing food around this parameter, it keeps the amount of sugar at an acceptable level. Be aware that when manufacturers start decreasing the fat content of foods, they often increase the content of sugar to improve taste.

In 2003 the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended limiting the intake of "free sugars" to 10% of total energy intake. Free sugars are sugars added to the food by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, plus sugars naturally present in honey, syrups and fruit juices. Now, WHO is considering halving its recommended maximum intake of free sugars to 5% of total energy.

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5 tips to keep sugar intake levels low:

1. Don't drink sugar – soft drinks, cordials and fruit juice
2. Don't add sugar – especially to cereals and beverages
3. Choose protein instead of sugar when you are hungry – handful of nuts, small tin of baked beans, small tin of tuna or an egg which will curb your appetite and give you longer lasting energy
4. Avoid sugary mixers with alcohol – think premixed bottled alcohol or bourbon and coke, gin and tonic. Look for mixers without sugar like soda water and lime.
5. Get rid of the lolly jar – if you have to walk past it 10 times each day at work or home, add up the number of lollies you may have had – it can be frightening! Mindless eating without any nutrition value. Think about the fact that every time you eat five strawberry and cream lollies, you have just clocked up the equivalent of a slice of bread or medium banana.

Find out more at www.julimeek.com.au.

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