

HOW TO SPOT HARMFUL SUGARS

Many seemingly innocuous foods contain high amounts of sugar, the overconsumption of which can lead to obesity. Be a 'grocery-shelf Sherlock' by learning to spot harmful sugars lurking in your grocery list.

We all know that too much sugar is bad for your health, but detecting sugar in the products we buy and eat isn't always obvious. Many savoury items like salad dressing, soups, sauces, breakfast cereals, bars and smoothies, bread and alcohol contain more sugar per serving than the recommended limit.

Consumers often find reading nutrition labels confusing, but don't let seemingly dense dietary information make you careless about food purchases. With a little discernment, you can translate information on food packaging into meaningful, positive behaviour change! Here's how to be smarter about identifying sugar in your diet.

SUGAR AND ITS MANY ALIASES

Check the ingredients list on products before you buy them, and watch out for these items, which all basically equate to sugar: white sugar, brown sugar, raw sugar, corn syrup, corn syrup solids, high fructose corn syrup, malt syrup, maple syrup, fructose sweetener, liquid fructose, honey, molasses, dextrose and dextrin.

If some form of sugar is in the first three ingredients listed on the product, rather give it a miss. To play it safe, try cut down on highly processed foods and buy as many whole foods as possible.

HOW MANY TEASPOONS?

Again, check the food label and look for the values in the carbohydrate section. Usually there is a sub-item called 'sugars' or 'of which total sugar'. The value is in grams. Every teaspoon of sugar is roughly 4g. You then need to check whether this value is listed per 100g or per serving. Multiply the value by the amount that will be consumed to calculate the number of teaspoons of sugar in that amount of the product.

THE LOW-DOWN ON SWEETENERS

- Applesauce, purees and concentrates may appear as 'natural sweeteners', but these are just forms of processed sugar.
- Aspartame, saccharin and sucralose are also marketed as sweeteners, but have harmful health effects.
- Sugar alcohols like xylitol and sorbitol are popular as sweeteners because they're absorbed into your body less than normal sugar.
- Pure honey consists of just over 50% of fructose in a completely raw and natural form, and has many health advantages.

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DRINKS – TOO OFTEN A SUGAR TRAP!

One of the biggest culprits for overconsumption is sugary drinks. Fizzy drinks are energy-dense (high in kilojoules) but low in nutrition, so it's easy to drink too many. "It's true that fruit is also high in sugar. However, whole, fresh fruit contains fibre. This generally makes you feel fuller before you can consume too much of it. The same cannot be said for fruit juice, energy drinks and other sweetened drinks," says Dr Louise van den Berg of the department of nutrition and dietetics at the University of the Free State.

Here's a quick guide to help you be savvier when shopping:

THE AMOUNT OF SUGAR IN 1 BOTTLE OR CAN OF:

