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Common sugar myths

By **Leonard Yap** - November 16, 2018 @ 9:35am

To sugar or not to sugar, is not the question. Instead, where your sugar is coming from, and how much you're consuming is the real issue

SUGAR occurs naturally in most foods like fruits, vegetables and milk. It is an important source of energy and when taken in moderation, can be part of a balanced diet. There are many myths surrounding sugar and diets that demonise all forms of sugar which only worsens the unfounded fear of sugar among consumers.

All sugar is bad

Sugar isn't evil, excessive consumption is!

We rely on sugar for energy – be it for our brains, bodies or nervous system.

Very often, people misinterpret the sugar adage and completely discard sugar from their diets, including healthy carbs like whole grains and fruits.

If you're really trying to be healthy, instead of cutting down carbs and all forms of sugar completely, you're actually better off cutting down the "added sugars" in your diet!

Added sugars are normally the table sugars added onto our guilty pleasures like the extra caramel drizzle on your caramel macchiato, the extra "kaw teh Tarik" from your local mamak stall and the maple syrup on your pancakes.

As far as guilty pleasures go, it's never wrong to indulge once in a while. The question of how much and how often you're indulging is the big problem.

Brown and natural sugars are healthier than white

This is probably the most common myth of all.

The truth is, it makes no difference whether the sugar is brown or white.

While culinarily speaking, brown sugar does have a deeper and more robust flavour than its white counterpart, all sugars are more or less the same and they do not have any significant nutritional differences.

White sugar has a glycaemic index (GI) of 68 while brown sugar 64, only a difference of 4, an apple on the other hand only has a GI score of 38.

Now that's a difference you should look for when choosing your sugar sources (but excessive consumption is still not a good idea!)

This applies to all types of "natural sugars", from bamboo sugar, and sugar with activated charcoal to "jaggeri".

Taking excessive amount of added sugars of any kind, will certainly lead to increased risks of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

Sugar makes you an addict

Some claim that sugar is as addictive as drugs.

The similarities of the two come in the sense that your brain rewards yourself with a surge of happiness (dopamine and other hormones) when you have sugars and because of how our brains associate events with emotions, frequent consumption of added sugars can lead to a form of "happiness and reward" associated with added sugar intake.

This can lead to a form of sugar dependency, which is why it's not a great idea for children to have high levels of added sugars in their diets.

While it's okay to reward ourselves once in a while, it definitely isn't good to develop a dependency with sugar, where at every emotional wave, you require sugar to "calm your nerves".

Added sugar causes diabetes and weight gain.

It's easy to see why this perception exists.

Type 2 diabetes, or any other disease for that matter, is complex and is often caused by a mix of factors.

While frequent excessive consumption of added sugars certainly leads to a higher risk of diseases, it certainly isn't fair to say that added sugar is the indemnifying sole causative factor.

In the case of diabetes, the abnormally high blood sugars are mostly related to excessive consumption of carbohydrates as a whole (rice, brown rice, noodles, bread) which includes added sugars.

The same goes with weight gain. Weight gain is the result of excessive energy or calories retained in your body, be it from over consumption of food, lack of physical activity and/or many other factors.

If you are a frequent added sugar consumer and trying to lose weight, completely eliminating added sugar – or worse, all carbs – may result in some weight loss indefinitely but it's an extremely restricted form of living!

Apart from weight gain when you revert back to your original diet, would you really want to live in a world with no more sweets, candies, cakes and pies?

How much added sugar is okay?

Moderation does not mean chowing down that jam filled doughnut every day!

Having a balanced diet with healthy carbs which includes whole grains and fruits is the way to go.

With regards to added sugars, the Malaysian nutrition guidelines recommend no more than 10 per cent of total energy intake from free (or added) sugars.

Recommended daily maximum sugar intake:

Sedentary adults: 6-9 teaspoons (30-45g)

Physically active adults: 10 teaspoons (50g)

Children (aged 2-18 years): less than 6 teaspoons (30g)

Teh Tarik has about 26g of added sugars, Teh O limau and Teh Tarik Ais - 30g.

Meaning that most of your typical sweet beverages, can easily max out your daily allowances of added sugars, assuming you just have only one beverage a day.

So, minimise added sugars where possible – they do not give any other nutritional benefits aside from calories.

For example, start by requesting for less sugar in all your drinks!

Avoid things like condensed milk and opt for evaporated milk instead like "Teh C kurang manis" or an Iced Latte (syrup self-added/avoided).

If you want to take it to next level, go "kosong" or no added sugar in your beverages.

As for those cakes and desserts, reserve them for celebrations once in a blue moon, and always share, share a slice of cake among three friends once in a while, it's perfectly fine.

Just don't eat it every day!

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