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How to cut down on sugar in your diet

A Practical Guide

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Most of the UK's population consumes more sugar than is recommended. Reducing intake can be done by cutting down on food and drinks high in added sugars, such as cakes, biscuits, soft drinks and sweets.

The specific type of sugar that people tend to exceed is known as 'free sugars'. Free sugars include those added into food and drinks during manufacturing or cooking, as well as naturally occurring sugars in foods such as honey, syrup and fruit juices. Products containing free sugars are often calorie-dense and low in micronutrients.

Consuming them on a regular basis can contribute to excess calorie intake, which increases the risk of weight gain. Be aware that naturally occurring sugars found in milk, fruit and vegetables do not count as free sugars.

Current government guidance recommends that adults should consume no more than 30g of free sugars per day, which equates to around 7 sugar cubes. This makes up around 5-10% of most people's daily caloric intake, whilst the recommendations for children are significantly reduced.

The suggestions below offer practical guidance on how to gradually reduce the amount of free sugars in your diet.

Sugar's Many Guises

There are lots of different ways added sugar can be listed on ingredients labels:

- Sucrose
- Glucose
- Fructose
- Maltose
- Dextrose
- Molasses
- Galactose
- Maltodextrin
- Corn syrup
- Maltitol
- Rice syrup
- Agave nectar
- Cane sugar

Nutrition labels on pre-packaged foods will tell you how much sugar is in the food. It will be listed under 'Carbohydrates of which sugars' which describes the total amount of sugars from all sources. Whilst this does not tell you the amount of free sugars, it is beneficial in helping you choose foods that are overall lower in sugar.

Foods considered to be high in sugar have >22.5g total sugar per 100g.

Foods considered to be low in sugar <5g total sugar per 100g.

Many packaged foods in the UK use the front-of-pack colour-coded traffic-light system, where sugars are marked as red (high), amber (medium) or green (low). Choosing products with more green and amber indicators, and fewer red ones, can help to reduce overall sugar intake.

BREAKFAST

Low sugar breakfast options focus on foods that provide sustained energy, balanced nutritional value and minimal free sugars. Good options include:

- Wholegrain cereals with no added sugar: porridge oats or shredded wheat, as these offer slow-release carbohydrates and fibre to maintain steady blood glucose levels and maintain fullness for longer.
- Eggs: lean protein provides satiety and helps support muscle maintenance.
- Wholegrain toast: opting for wholegrain options offers more fibre, which slows digestion, helping control appetite and manage weight.
- A sweetened low-fat Greek yoghurt: paired with nuts and seeds, this is a versatile option, supporting digestive health and providing healthy fats and protein.
- Fruits: particularly low-sugar options such as berries, pears and apples, provide vitamins, minerals and fibre without the rapid spikes in fibre often associated with sugary foods.

In contrast, high-sugar breakfasts such as sugary cereals, spreads such as jam or chocolate spread, pastries, sweetened yoghurts and fruit juices can lead to sharp spikes in blood glucose, shortly followed by a crash in energy, which may increase appetite and lead to overeating later on in the day. These foods often contain excess calories with very little nutritional value, contributing to weight gain when consumed on a regular basis. Limiting high-sugar breakfast items and replacing them with more nutrient-dense, low-sugar options can support more steady energy levels, appetite control and overall health.



Main Meals

Many lunch and dinner options, especially ready meals and takeaways, contain unexpectedly high levels of sugar, even when they don't taste sweet. Sauces, marinades, dressings, and glazes like sweet and sour sauce, barbeque sauce, ketchup, and chutney are common sources of added sugars. Even 'healthier' options like low-fat ready meals can contain added sugar to improve texture and flavor. To ensure the ingredients, make meals from scratch at home. When selecting prepared foods, check nutrition labels for total sugars per serving.

Good low-sugar lunch and dinner options include lean proteins like chicken breast, tofu, or white fish. Serve them with vegetables and whole grains like brown rice for a balanced meal. Simple grilled, baked, or steamed meals contain less added sugar than those with sauces, which are high in sugar. For packed lunches, prepare your food at home to take with you, as healthy options in cafes or shops may be limited. Preparing at home also gives you control over added sugars. Unsweetened soups, salads with olive oil-based dressings, or wholegrain wraps with lean fillings are reliable options.

Snacks

Healthier snack options are generally regarded as those without added sugar and with minimal processing. Examples include fresh or frozen fruit, unsalted nuts and rice cakes, oatcakes and homemade plain popcorn. You don't have to give up your favourite snacks entirely, and a gradual reduction can be a much more sustainable starting point. For example, instead of eating two biscuits at once, consider cutting down to one. This way, you are still able to enjoy the foods you like, but in a more mindful way. If you are prone to an 'all-or-nothing' mindset, it may be useful on some days to focus entirely on non-food related activities, to prevent habitual or mindless snacking.

- Cereal and Protein bars: despite often being sold as a 'healthy' option, many of these bars are ultra-processed and packed with sugar and fat. Look for options that are lower in sugar, fat or salt. It is also easy to make granola or oat bars yourself at home, where you are able to control ingredients.
- Chocolate: opt for 1-2 squares of dark chocolate (>70% cocoa) instead of milk or white. Dark chocolate contains significantly less sugar than other types, and has added health benefits such as antioxidants and flavanols, which can have positive effects on blood pressure. However, it is still high in calories and fat, so it's important to consume in moderation.
- Biscuits: try and swap highly-processed biscuits for homemade oat-based biscuits, also containing dried fruit. These tend to be lower calorie and also provide dietary fibre.
- Cakes: alternative include plain scones or malt loaf. If using spreads, use small amounts and try to use low-fat and low-sugar options.

Drinks



A typical can of cola (330 ml) contains as much sugar as 3.5 Krispy Kreme donuts, and 79% of sugary soft drinks contain 6 or more teaspoons of sugar per can. Choosing sugar-free options, such as Diet Coke, can significantly reduce sugar intake. However, water, skimmed milk or sparkling water with a small amount of fruit juice are preferable everyday options.

If you regularly add sugar to tea or coffee, consider gradually reducing the amount you add until you are able to wean off it entirely, or replace it with a sugar-free sweetener.

Fruit juice can be high in sugar, even though you may not expect it. This is because when fruit is juiced, the sugars are released from the cellular structure of the fruit and become 'free sugars', which can contribute to tooth decay amongst other things. Current guidelines suggest that the total combined daily intake of fruit juice, vegetable juice and smoothies should not exceed 150 ml, which equates to one small glass.

Natural fruit juices and smoothies can contribute to your 5-a-day as they contain valuable vitamins and minerals. However, during the juicing process, fibre is often removed and sugar becomes concentrated, even in natural juices. This means that regardless of the amount consumed, juices and smoothies can only ever make up one portion of your 5-a-day.

Flavouring water at home by adding ingredients such as lemon or fresh mint can make it more appealing. However, it is important to exercise caution when considering a commercially flavoured water drinks, as some of them contain significant amounts of added sugar. Depending on the brand, some 500 ml bottles of flavoured water drinks can contain 15g sugar; equivalent to 4 teaspoons.

DESSERT

Desserts can be incorporated into a healthy, balanced diet when they are enjoyed mindfully and in appropriate portions. Rather than eliminating desserts entirely, it is helpful to view them as an occasional component of meals, ideally eaten alongside or after a main meal rather than as a frequent standalone snack. This can help reduce their impact on blood sugar levels and dental health. Choosing smaller portions, sharing desserts or opting for lower-sugar or fruit-based options can help moderate overall energy and free sugar intake. It is also important to maintain balance throughout the day by prioritising regular balanced meals containing lean protein, fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and healthy fats. When the diet as a whole is nutritionally adequate and varied, dessert can be enjoyed occasionally without compromising overall health.

However, there are several steps that can be taken in order to enjoy dessert whilst still reducing your sugar intake. Favour desserts that are naturally lower in free sugars, such as fresh fruit, baked fruit, or yoghurts without added sugar. Plain Greek or natural yoghurt with berries, cinnamon, or a small amount of grated dark chocolate can satisfy sugar cravings, whilst also providing added calcium and protein. When baking at home, reducing the sugar in recipes, using flavourings such as vanilla for sweetness, and relying on the naturally occurring sweetness from fruit can help to reduce overall sugar content. Portion size is also important, as smaller servings can help limit sugar intake without complete avoidance.

