

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Pellizzari, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit

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Sugar...the not-so-sweet truth

Last month, the World Health Organization issued its recommendation on sugar intake following a year-long consultation and review.

The guideline advises that individuals limit their intake of "free sugars" to "less than 10% of calories" (50 grams of free sugars based on a 2000 calorie diet) and as low as 5% of calories (25 grams) to enjoy additional health benefits. The reality is that, on average, Canadians are getting at least 13% of their calories from free sugar.

Aside from giving us energy, sugar has no nutritional benefit. If we get too much, we increase our risk for dental cavities and health problems like heart disease, stroke, obesity, diabetes, high blood cholesterol and cancer.

Free sugars refer to sugars added to food and drinks by manufacturers, cooks, and ourselves to make them sweeter (such as glucose, fructose, table sugar, honey, syrups and fruit juices). These sugars are the ones that can cause harm. Free sugars do not include sugar that is naturally present in milk, vegetables, whole fruit, legumes, grains, seeds and nuts. (These healthy foods offer us a variety of other nutrients, so we should be eating them every day.)

For an average 2000 calorie-a-day diet, 10% of calories is 48 grams of sugar (about 12 teaspoons), and 5% of calories is 24 grams (or 6 teaspoons) of sugar. People who get 10%-25% of their calories from free sugars have a 30% higher risk of death from heart disease or stroke than those who get under 10%. If they get more than 25%, their risk is tripled.

Sugar-sweetened beverages are the single largest contributor of added sugar in our diet. They include pop, fruit drinks, energy drinks, sports drinks, flavoured and vitamin-enhanced waters, sweetened teas and coffees, plant-based beverages (e.g. almond, rice or soy beverages), flavoured milks and hot chocolate. A 355ml can of pop has 40 grams of sugar (85% of the daily limit), and a large double-double coffee has 30 grams of sugar (63% of the daily limit). Consuming those two items alone blows our recommended daily maximum intake out of the water. Shudder to think how much sugar we consume if we buy the bigger bottle of pop or have more than one coffee a day! It is clear that most of us are getting calories we don't need, and these drinks are often taking the place of water and milk. This reduces our total intake of important nutrients, including calcium and vitamin D.

There are ways for individuals to cut down on sugar. The first step is to drink less sugar-loaded beverages. This action alone can have an enormous impact on how much sugar we consume. Instead, quenching our thirst with water saves calories and money, making it the best option for many reasons.

But getting Canadians down to the recommended 5-10% of daily energy as free sugar will take a shift in our food environment. It starts by supporting informed consent. By updating nutrition labels to declare how much free sugar is in our food, Canadians will be able to make healthier choices for ourselves and

our families. We'll need the federal government to mandate changes to labelling so that information is available to us in a way that is clear and accurate. That might not happen without public demand.

Relying on the food industry to reduce the use of free sugar may be unrealistic. Reducing our intake of processed foods, in general, will decrease our daily sugar, salt and fat intakes. Building a diet that is rich in fruits and vegetables, prepared at home, and enjoyed together at family meals, is the kind of food environment that will sustain healthier eating and healthier lives.

646 words