

Is Sugar Unhealthy for Children?

As public health dietitians, we know sugar can be a charged topic. We all want the best for our kids and don't want to cause harm. How do we approach the topic of sugar when thinking about children's health?

What is sugar?

Sugar is a type of carbohydrate that is either naturally occurring or added to food and drinks. Some examples of added sugars include brown sugar, white sugar, honey, and syrup. All carbohydrates are broken down into sugar in our bodies and used as our main fuel, including for brain and muscle function.



There are some nutritious foods that contain naturally-occurring sugar, including fresh, frozen, canned, and dried fruit and vegetables (fructose) as well as plain milk and yogurt (lactose). These foods have important nutrients that most people often don't get enough of, such as fibre, calcium, and vitamin D. Sugar can enhance the flavor, texture, and colour of foods.

Is added sugar unhealthy?

No one food alone is unhealthy. Having a sugary drink once in a while won't affect overall health. However when sweet foods, and especially sweet drinks, replace other nutritious foods often, it can increase the risk of health problems over time. If we provide a variety of foods for children to choose from within a routine structure of meals and snacks, they can develop the skills to eat well in the long run.

How does sugar fit into children's diets?

Sweet foods can bring pleasure and are often a part of celebrations and traditions. When we don't allow children to eat some sweets, they can develop food cravings, which can contribute to higher stress levels and feelings of shame or guilt. This can lead to unhealthy habits and disordered eating. It isn't a good idea to cut out sugar completely, but rather to include it in moderation.

Is sugar the problem?

If we take an approach that [all foods are available](#), it removes the power and value of this single ingredient. If you notice adverse effects of sugar on children, ask yourself whether perhaps there's something else going on. Sometimes we think sugar is the problem when actually our

child is tired, dehydrated, overwhelmed, or isn't being offered a variety of foods at meals and snacks.

What about sugar substitutes?

There are no proven health benefits associated with the intake of sugar substitutes (such as stevia, aspartame, sucralose, and xylitol). Promote nutritious unsweetened foods and beverages instead.

What about carbonated and fruit-flavoured water?

Carbonated and unsweetened herb or fruit-flavoured water are low-sugar drink choices. However, some of these drinks can also be acidic, which can contribute to tooth decay in kids. They are an option to serve occasionally at meals and snacks.

How do I talk about sugar with kids?

When talking about foods with added sugar, aim to refer to them in the same way as other foods. We may offer sweet foods in smaller amounts than other foods, but describe them as "food" instead of "bad" or "junk" foods. If you use rewards, aim for [non-food rewards](#). When we reward with candy or sweets, for example, it can lead to children eating more of those foods in the long run.

How do I strike a balance around sugar with kids, while maintaining oral health?

Include sweets at some meals and snacks so they don't become taboo:

- find out more about [how to use sweets with children](#)

Include plain water between meals and snacks:

- send a water bottle to school

Offer children drinks from these choices at meals and snacks:

- water, plain milk, unsweetened fortified soy beverage

Aim for [good oral care](#):

- brush teeth twice a day using fluoride toothpaste

Schedule meal and snacks during the day:

- a [regular routine and structure](#) helps children eat a healthy diet



Sugar doesn't have to be the only focus if we can emphasize offering children a variety of foods from [Canada's food guide](#) to provide them with the nutrients they need to grow, play, and learn.

If you have any specific questions about your child's nutrition, you may contact HealthLinkBC at 8-1-1 to speak to a registered dietitian or [email a HealthLinkBC dietitian](#).