

Sugar Advice for Cancer Survivors



This fact sheet is one in a series developed for cancer survivors who have finished active treatment. Eating well and maintaining a healthy weight may help lower the chances of some cancers returning and improve overall health.

Sugar is commonly added to a range of foods but it is a substance we should be careful of over-consuming.

What is sugar?

Sugars are also known as simple carbohydrates or monosaccharides. They are found naturally in food, giving it a distinct sweet flavour. Sugars give our bodies energy, but in high quantities they can be bad for your health. Sugars occur in different forms:

- **Glucose** – is found in fruit, some vegetables, table sugar, honey and foods that are naturally sweet.
- **Lactose** – is found in milk, yoghurt and other dairy products.
- **Fructose** – also gives fruit its sweetness.

How is sugar used in the body?

All foods are broken down in the digestive system into basic nutrients such as proteins, vitamins, minerals and glucose. These nutrients are then broken down further so they can be absorbed through the wall of the gut into the bloodstream.

Glucose (the simplest form of sugar) is the main energy source for all cells. Without glucose, cells cannot function. A hormone called insulin controls the amount of glucose that is in the bloodstream and inside the cells. Diabetes can occur when the body doesn't produce enough insulin or the insulin doesn't work effectively. See overleaf for more information.



Some people mistakenly believe that sugar feeds cancer cells so they decide to lower their sugar intake or try to eliminate sugar from their diet altogether.

Glucose is the main energy source for all cells. It is converted in the body from complex carbohydrates such as breads and pasta, or from other substances if there are not enough carbohydrates in the diet.

If sugar is extremely reduced, it can result in a diet that is too restrictive. As well as being difficult to maintain, the diet is likely to be lacking in major food groups, which can cause other problems.

Lactose intolerance

Lactose is a sugar found naturally in milk. Some people cannot digest lactose because they don't produce a substance called lactase. This is an enzyme that helps to break down milk sugars.

A GP or gastroenterologist can organise tests to diagnose lactose intolerance.

You will be advised to replace dairy foods with other foods that do not contain lactose but which also provide the nutrients

that are found in milk, such as protein, vitamins A, D, E and K, and the mineral calcium. Examples are tofu, bony fish (such as tinned salmon or sardines), and tahini (made from sesame seeds). A dietitian can give you other suggestions.



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What is diabetes?

A person with diabetes does not create insulin naturally or does not produce enough insulin, so the glucose levels in their body aren't controlled.

This may cause symptoms such as thirst, frequent urination, leg cramps, itchiness, blurred vision or frequent tiredness.

There are two types of diabetes:

- Type 1 is usually diagnosed in childhood and may be caused by a virus. This type is not common.
- Type 2 is more common and is usually diagnosed later in life. Risk factors include being overweight; having a high-fat, high-sugar diet; not exercising; and having a family history of the disease.

People with diabetes usually need medication to help their insulin work more efficiently or to provide their body with insulin.

In cases of type 2 diabetes, reducing weight, increasing exercise and making healthy dietary changes, such as reducing sugar and fat intake, can also be helpful.

Why should I watch my sugar levels?

Even though it's tasty, sugar is not beneficial in large quantities. High-sugar foods can also contribute to other health problems such as tooth decay and being overweight.

Eating sugary foods such as lollies, biscuits and chocolate bars does not keep your body full for very long. These snacks are known as "empty calorie foods" because even though they are high in calories (or kilojoules), they provide little nourishment. This can lead to frequent snacking throughout the day, so people may end up eating more than they need to.

If you continually fill up on sugary foods, you will also probably miss out on getting essential nutrients for your health and well-being.

What changes can I make?

- It's okay to eat foods that are naturally high in sugar such as fruit. You'll also be getting various vitamins and minerals, and fibre. But other sugar-filled foods and drinks should be consumed sparingly.
- Do enough physical activity to burn off the amount of kilojoules you are eating. See the fact sheet *Exercise to Counteract the Kilojoules* for tips.

Soft drinks are empty calorie foods. A can of soft drink has up to nine teaspoons of sugar. This equals 700 kilojoules (170 calories), and needs 30 minutes of brisk walking to burn off.



This fact sheet provides general information only and is not a substitute for individual health advice. You should talk to your doctor or dietitian about your specific situation.

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