Sugar: More Than Just a Sweet Taste

When most people think of sugars they think sweets, and gaining weight. Reality is sugar itself doesn’t make you gain weight. So why are there recommendations to eat sugar in moderation or decrease sugar consumption? First, let's look at sugar.

There are three simple sugars: fructose, glucose and lactose. The other sugar name that you hear quite often is sucrose which is another name for table sugar and a combination of fructose and glucose. These sugars occur naturally in foods and are sometimes added, but no matter what the name or form, they all contribute 4 calories per gram. For example, many fruits and vegetables get their sweet taste from fructose, glucose and sucrose. Lactose is a milk sugar and is considered as tasting less sweet. In fact, the only difference between a sugar that is naturally occurring (sugars that are found in unprocessed foods) and added sugar (sugar added during processing) is the source.

Sugars do more than just taste good! According to the International Food Information Council sugars play a very important role in our food:

- They add texture, flavor, and color to baked foods helping them brown evenly.
- They help bread to rise.
- They contribute to the “bulk,” or volume, of ice cream, baked goods, and preserves and jams.
- They enhance the creamy texture of frozen desserts.
- They provide a satisfying body and texture in beverages.
- They enhance flavor and balance the natural acidity in non-sweet foods, such as salad dressings, sauces, and condiments.
- They preserve the flavor, aroma and color of the fruits used in jellies, jams, and preserves (and prevent spoilage after the jar is opened).
- They improve flavor and texture and help preserve the natural color and shape of the fruits used for canning and freezing.

So, what is sugar doing in your body? Sugars are part of Carbohydrates, which is the body’s most important and readily available source of energy. The body breaks food down into smaller units, primarily glucose and fructose. These are absorbed into the blood stream, transported to the cells of the body and converted into energy. Glucose requires insulin to move from the bloodstream into the cells. Fructose is usually converted to glucose before going on. Glucose is the body’s primary fuel that powers everything you do: moving, breathing, thinking, and even digesting food.

To pull it all together does sugar cause weight gain? No. Weight gain is caused by eating more calories than you expend. No matter what the source of the calorie – proteins, fats, alcohol, carbohydrates, or sugars - too many calories could mean gaining weight. So why does everyone think sugar is the problem? Many “sugary” foods are not usually high in nutrients (vitamins, minerals, etc.), so you are not getting as many benefits as you would if you chose a food higher in nutrients. It is important to choose foods that have added nutritional benefit for your body. If you are comparing the same foods (for example bread vs. bread), look at the entire food label but remember adding sugar does add calories, no matter what kind of sugar it is.

Cakes, cookies, and other baked goods are delicious to eat, but they are not high in nutrients and should be eaten in moderation, or as a “sometimes” food. Some foods that are considered “good for you” may have a lot of added sugar. Remember, it is not the sugar that is the problem, it is the added calories – are they necessary or should you choose a different product? Having a weight problem does not necessarily mean one consumes more sugars or has more of a sweet tooth. The bottom line is that people need to consume a variety of foods, choosing those with more nutrients more often and incorporate exercise into their daily routine.