

Debunking the SUGAR confusion

Chef **Georgie Soskin** and nutritionist **Jo Saunders** of *Cooking them Healthy* shed light on good and bad sugars



As new research studies are carried out and updated health information becomes available, the media tends to run with this, creating trends in nutrition news. As we are sure you are aware, sugar is currently the 'big thing' and according to a recent study by Bupa nearly half of mums (46%) are worried their child might be addicted to sugar.

The news that sugar is bad for us is hardly groundbreaking, however it does inevitably create some confusion and raises certain questions. Here at *Cooking them Healthy* we aim to debunk the confusion, highlight new important developments and offer advice on possible sugar alternatives for your family.

We are all naturally drawn to sugar – and it does have addictive qualities.

Our first milk as babies is sweet, due to the lactose content, and that sweet tooth develops as we grow.

But is sugar all bad? We actually all need some sugar, or specifically glucose, in our



diets as it acts as fuel to power all our body's cells. This can be found in the carbohydrates that we eat (all carbohydrates break down into sugars in different forms), such as fructose found in fruit and some root

vegetables and lactose, found in milk. It is the added sugar in our diets that is creating the potential problem – have a look at our list of sugar alternatives (right) to help you make healthier choices. ▶

SUGAR ALTERNATIVES

At *Cooking them Healthy* we like to use alternatives to refined sugars such as honey, maple syrup and dried and fresh fruit. These foods contain sugar but are less processed and have nutritional benefits. Here's our guide to sugar alternatives.

WHITE OR BROWN SUGAR?

Brown and white sugar are fairly nutritionally equal. There are some 'healthier' brown sugars such as coconut palm sugar and Rapadura sugar.

MAPLE SYRUP

Maple syrup is rich in minerals such as zinc, potassium, iron and manganese. Darker maple syrup is richer in antioxidants than paler versions.

DRIED FRUIT

Dates, for example, are naturally packed full of fibre and contain health-boosting minerals.

FRESH FRUIT

Fruit is full of fibre plus useful vitamins and minerals. Try grated apples to sweeten recipes.

BROWN RICE SYRUP

Popular in the health community, this is a sweetener derived from brown rice, releasing sugar into the bloodstream slower than other sweeteners.

HONEY


Honey has natural antimicrobial properties and contains vitamins C and B6 to support immune health. Find local raw honey which hasn't been heat treated as this can reduce its health benefits.

Did you
know?



WHOLE FRUIT CONTAINS FRUCTOSE, BUT IT ALSO CONTAINS FIBRE TO HELP SLOW DOWN THE RELEASE OF SUGAR INTO THE BLOODSTREAM AS WELL AS PLENTY OF VALUABLE VITAMINS AND MINERALS.

When people talk about the evils of sugar they are generally referring to refined sugars. Refined sugar is devoid of all nutrients, and it actually requires nutrients for its metabolism and will therefore rob them from your child's body. Eating sugar tends to cause a spike in blood glucose levels, which in turn has a knock on effect on how we feel, affecting our mood and energy levels, which is particularly noticeable in little ones. More long-term intake of high levels of sugar can lead to related health problems such as type 2 diabetes and other metabolic disorders. Sugar can also have an inflammatory effect on the body, as well as weakening the immune system and exacerbating existing conditions such as eczema.

At Cooking them Healthy, we more than understand the importance of balance for happy family life, and it is unrealistic to expect families to eliminate added sugar altogether. After all, sweet foods taste good, and life would be no fun if we didn't allow ourselves and our children a treat every now and again. We would however encourage you to embrace the alternatives, and where possible, swap refined sugar for a more nutritious alternative. Low sugar certainly doesn't have to be tasteless and dull. It is also really worth looking at your family's diet and putting some thought into ways to reduce the sugar content – you will be surprised how easy it is to do. 

OFFER SOME PROTEIN WITH A PIECE OF FRUIT, LIKE A SMALL HANDFUL OF NUTS OR PIECES OF CHEESE, TO HELP TEMPER THE SUGAR SPIKE.



Did you know?

tip
Combine your granola with the sweet apple and pear compote and a dollop of yoghurt. Children's yoghurts are often highly sweetened so try a plain one with a drizzle of honey



AMAZING GRANOLA

This recipe is a firm favourite of ours, and contains no refined sugar.

Most commercial granola mixtures tend to be very sweet. In our recipe we use dates and bananas for natural sweetness. And the nuts and seeds are packed with protein and minerals.

Makes 1 large Kilner jar

300g rolled oats
200g pitted dates
100g dried apricots, chopped
2 ripe bananas
60g dried berries
60g hazelnuts
60g linseed
60g cashew nuts
60g pumpkin seeds
60g sunflower seeds
90ml boiling water
150ml apple juice

Method:

Preheat the oven to 160°C and line a large lipped baking sheet or roasting tin with silicone or non-stick baking parchment.

Place the dates in a bowl and cover with 90ml boiling water to soften. Place cling film over the top and leave for 5 minutes, or place in the microwave for 1 minute.

Next, place the softened fruit into a mixer or use a hand blender to purée to a pulp. Add the bananas so you have a thick smoothie-type mixture.

Put all the dry ingredients (but not the dried fruits) into a bowl and mix in the date and banana smoothie. Using a large metal spoon, or your hands, break up the mixture and separate any large chunks.

Add the apple juice which will help to loosen the mix slightly. If it still seems too clumpy you can always add a dash more apple juice but you do want some lumps.

Spread the mixture out onto the baking sheet and place in the oven for 10 to 15 minutes until it starts to turn slightly golden. At this point, stir and break up any big bits. Pop back in the oven and after 10 minutes stir again. Do this for 30 to 40 minutes until the mix is nice and dry.

Leave the granola to cool and then add the dried fruits such as apricots and raisins.

Store in a large Kilner jar and serve with yoghurt, milk or compote.



SWEET APPLE & PEAR SPICED COMPOTE

Not only is this wonderfully naturally sweet but it's the ideal recipe for any little person who has suffered a tummy upset. Pears are one of the least allergenic fruits so are well suited to sensitive tummies.

For breakfast this compote is perfect added to porridge, natural or Greek yogurt, or it can be a healthy snack or delicious pudding.

Serves 8

1 Bramley or cooking apple, peeled and finely chopped
2 pears (Conference or Comice work well), peeled and finely chopped
2 tbsp honey
1/4 tsp cinnamon
30g raisins (optional)
A glug (approximately 100ml) of apple juice or water

Method:

Simply place the apple and pear, with the apple juice or water, into a small saucepan and allow to simmer gently on a low heat with the lid on for 5 to 10 minutes until the fruit has softened. Remove the lid and cook for another 5 minutes until all the fruit is cooked through, translucent and soft.

Next add the honey, raisins and cinnamon and stir through.

You can enjoy this compote hot or cold – why not try it with your granola? This keeps well in an airtight container for up to a week. You can also freeze it into individual portions and defrost when needed.

LOW FAT FOODS TEND TO CONTAIN HIGHER SUGAR LEVELS (OR SWEETENERS) TO IMPROVE FLAVOUR.



Did you know?

COOKING THEM HEALTHY'S BANANA BREAD

Our Banana Bread is made without refined sugar and is sweetened by mineral rich honey, maple syrup and natural banana sweetness. Spelt, an ancient cousin of wheat, has a lower gluten content and as a result is more easily digested than other white flours. You can of course use gluten-free flour if required. The dark chocolate chips add an indulgent feel and are packed with wonderful antioxidants. This freezes brilliantly, and a good trick is to slice it before freezing so you can just take what you need.

Makes 1 loaf (or 12 muffins)

190g white spelt flour
2 eggs
1 tsp vanilla essence
65ml honey
50ml maple syrup
1 tsp baking powder
90ml buttermilk or natural yoghurt
2 ripe bananas, mashed
50g butter, melted
1 banana, sliced, to garnish
50g dark chocolate chips (optional)

Method:

Preheat the oven to 180°C. In a bowl, combine the honey, maple syrup, eggs, yoghurt, mashed bananas and melted butter and combine well. Sieve in the flour and add the baking powder, gently folding. Do this quickly and lightly to retain air.

Pour the mix into a greased and lined loaf tin (24cm by 10cm), garnish with banana and bake in the middle of the oven for about an hour (up to 1 hour 10 minutes). Insert a skewer to test it's ready and cool on a rack.

TOP TIPS

Cooking them Healthy's advice for reducing sugar intake:

- Refined sugar is found in almost all processed food – including savoury ones
- Swap sugary breakfast cereals for more filling and nutritious options such as homemade granola (using dates to sweeten, see page 85), breakfast muffin or eggs
- Try baking using honey, maple syrup and dried fruits to help sweeten
- If following a standard recipe, try reducing the sugar quantity up to half. You'll be surprised how soon you adjust
- Cook with dark chocolate. Experiment with antioxidant rich dark chocolate chips in place of milk chocolate chips containing added sugar
- Dilute fruit juice with water. Cordials are better than concentrated juices due to the ratio of water to cordial. Flavouring water with lemon or fun ice cubes can encourage children to drink more
- Swap all refined and white products (pasta, bread and rice) to brown or wholegrain varieties. This will also boost nutrient intake such as B vitamins and fibre

For more foodie hints and tips from Georgie and Jo visit: cookingthemhealthy.com



Did you
know?



IF SUGAR IS LISTED IN THE TOP THREE INGREDIENTS IN SOMETHING THEN WE WOULD ADVISE RECONSIDERING PURCHASING IT. SOMETIMES SUGAR IS DISGUISED IN INGREDIENTS UNDER A DIFFERENT NAME, SUCH AS SUCROSE, GLUCOSE SYRUP, MALTOSE, DEXTROSE AND FRUCTOSE.