

Anything but sweets

Our dependence on sugar is troubling. *by Dr. Susan Maples*

It doesn't take a panel of experts or a major public health organization to realize we have a sugar problem. When we hear that our average sugar consumption is up to 22-30 teaspoons a day we can hardly fathom it. "Surely that's not me!" we say. So much of this is tucked into the foods we eat in the sneakiest way, it is easy to live in denial. Of course we know that sweet drinks are a big part of the problem.

In the new guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) there is a recommendation that all adults chop their sugar intake to 5 percent of their daily calories. How much is 5 percent? If you are of average body weight and consuming about 2000 calories a day, 5 percent would be about 100 calories... or 25 grams...or a tad more than 5 teaspoons a day. For soda drinkers that represents less than one 8 oz can a day for your TOTAL sugar consumption.

What about kids? Since a child has a lower body weight and lower energy requirement, one 8 oz soda represents about 10 percent of total calorie intake.

The WHO's report is a reaction to the growing obesity and diabetes epidemics as well as the continued rise in tooth decay. The particular concern is of the massive consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks in all industrialized countries, such as colas, sports drinks, energy drinks, sweet tea and processed juice. Not only is the sugar harmful to the liver, pancreas and tooth structure, but it's completely void of nutrients that the body desperately needs to ward off inflammation and boost the immune system.

The WHO's Nutrition Guidance Expert Advisory Group (NUGAG) has been hard at work over the past couple years, considering the evidence-based research that compares the health risk from "free sugars" (read "added sugars") to intrinsic

fructose found in whole fruit and vegetables.

The report shows that the evidence is most clear on tooth decay (dental caries). Studies confirm decay rates increase in proportion to sugar consumption in children. Are we surprised?

"Because dental caries are the result of lifelong exposure to the dietary risk factor (ie, sugars), even small reductions in risk of dental caries in childhood is of significance in later life," says the document.

Will the food industry stand behind this recommendation? Not on your life! (Pardon the pun.) It becomes our personal responsibility to read the labels and cut the crap.

To learn more about our sugar crisis, try to see the Katie Couric-produced movie "Fed Up!" It's still playing in theaters in cities throughout the country, including Grand Rapids. Unfortunately it didn't make it to the Lansing market.



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