



Sugar in the Diet: How Much Are We Actually Consuming?

A LOOK AT THE FACTS

Did you know the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been monitoring food supply data since 1909? This extensive history shapes our insights on dietary trends and Americans' food intake, which is especially important for helping us understand what's behind today's rates of overweight and obesity.

With that in mind, it should come as no surprise Americans consume more than 450 additional calories each day than we did 40 years ago. People were consuming 2,024 calories each day back in 1970. The most recent calorie data shows by 2010 that figure jumped to 2,481 (nearly a 25 percent increase).¹

During the past 40 years, the additional calorie consumption has paralleled the rise of obesity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey showed in the early 1970s, obesity prevalence was 14.5 percent. In 2014, that figure jumped significantly to 37.9 percent.^{2,3}

So, how does sugar fit into this?

The latest sugar intake data show that added sugars have only contributed 40 of the additional 457 calories Americans are consuming daily. To drill down even further, USDA data focused on the same period of time shows that per capita consumption of real sugar (i.e., sucrose, or table sugar) is actually one-third lower today than it was in 1970. Similarly, the latest NHANES consumption data estimated a decrease in added sugars by 2.6 teaspoons from 2003-04 to 2011-12.⁴

ALL FOODS FIT... BUT CALORIES COUNT

Excess calorie consumption, combined with sedentary living, is a major contributing factor to the obesity crisis, independent of any single food or nutrient consumed. A recent systematic review of the evidence concluded "if there are any adverse effects of sugar, they are due entirely to the calories it provides."⁵ Additionally, three authoritative scientific organizations, including the Institute of Medicine, European Food Safety Authority, and the United Kingdom Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition, each conducted extensive scientific reviews of the evidence on "added sugars" and obesity and found no unique role for added sugars.^{6,7,8}

The United States' continued focus on the obesity epidemic to assist Americans with achieving healthier weights should place emphasis on individuals reducing their overall food and beverage intake, instead of targeting one isolated component.⁹

"Sugars add desirable sensory effects to many foods, and a sweet taste promotes enjoyment of meals and snacks. In fact, when sugars are added to otherwise nutrient-rich foods, such as sugar-sweetened dairy products like flavored milk and yogurt and sugar-sweetened cereals, the quality of children's and adolescents' diets improves."

-American Heart Association¹⁰



"Sugars consumed in nutrient-poor foods and beverages are the primary problem to be addressed, not simply sugars themselves. Consumed within recommended calorie amounts, sweetness can offer an effective tool to promote consumption of nutrient-dense foods and beverages."

-American Academy of Pediatrics¹⁸

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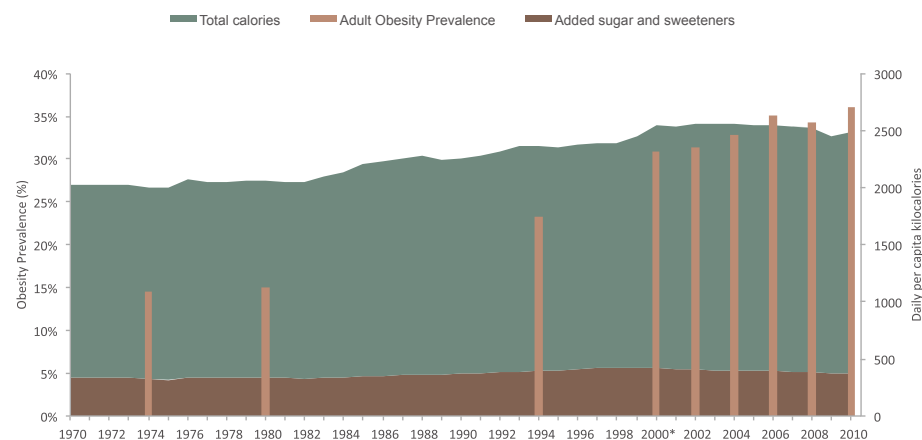
ENSURING A QUALITY DIET

We know calorie balance is essential for weight maintenance, but there's another, very important dimension of planning a healthful diet: nutrient density. A high-quality diet gives the most "bang for your calorie buck," meaning it includes foods that have a higher ratio of vitamins and minerals to the calories they provide.

This is where sugar can play an important role in nutrition. Sugar is often viewed as simply a source of calories that people don't need, while the significant role it plays in a nutrient-rich diet is often not discussed. Decades of research on added sugars in the diet support that sugar helps increase the palatability of healthy foods, making it a key partner in nutrient delivery.^{10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17} However, it's important to mention that sugar-containing foods that don't contribute appreciable nutritional value should be treated as, well... treats, and consumed as such within caloric needs.

When you look at the big picture by focusing on the entire nutrient package of a food (versus just one nutrient), sugar can easily be incorporated into a healthy, balanced (and enjoyable!) diet.

Daily per capita Total Calories and Calories consumed from Added Sugars, 1970-2010^{20,21,22}



Year	Sugar Intake (tsp)	Obesity Prevalence (%)
1970s	20.8	14.5%
2014	22.9	37.9%
Percent Increase	10%	161%

"Choose a healthy eating pattern at an appropriate calorie level to help achieve and maintain a healthy body weight, support nutrient adequacy, and reduce the risk of chronic disease. To meet nutrient needs within calorie limits, choose a variety of nutrient-dense foods across and within all food groups in recommended amounts."

-Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2015 – 2020¹⁹

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