

You are eating more sugar than you think

Sugar is everywhere – your morning tea, that “healthy” breakfast cereal, the juice you give your children, the bread on your table, even in foods you wouldn’t suspect. It tastes good, it comforts, it celebrates. So, why all the concern? Why do doctors, nutritionists and public health experts keep warning about it?

A CLOSER LOOK

Sugar isn’t the villain, until it is your body actually needs sugar. Glucose, a form of sugar, is your body’s main source of energy and your brain depends heavily on it. When you eat natural foods like fruits, vegetables and whole grains, your body breaks them down into glucose and uses it efficiently.

So, sugar itself isn’t the enemy – the problem is how much, how often, and in what form we consume it.

THE REAL ISSUE: ADDED SUGAR

There is an important difference between natural sugars and added sugars. Natural sugars – found in fruits, milk and whole foods – come with fibre, vitamins and other nutrients. They are absorbed slowly and are generally safe.

Added sugars, on the other hand – found in sodas, cakes, biscuits and processed foods – are often “empty calories.” They provide energy, but little to no nutritional value and are absorbed quickly, flooding your bloodstream.

SUGAR AND WEIGHT GAIN

One of the most visible effects of excess sugar is weight gain. Sugary foods and drinks are high in calories but do little to make you feel full, so



SURGEON'S CORNER
DR MOSES GALUKANDE

you often end up consuming more than you realise. Over time, this leads to increased body fat, especially around the abdomen, which is strongly linked to heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR HEART?

Sugar’s impact goes beyond diabetes. High intake can raise triglycerides, increase blood pressure and promote inflammation – all of which contribute to cardiovascular disease, including heart attacks and strokes.

SUGAR AND THE LIVER

Your liver processes sugar, particularly fructose, which is common in added sugars. Too much fructose can overwhelm the liver, leading to fat buildup – a condition known as nonalcoholic fatty liver disease.

In other words, you don’t need alcohol to damage your liver – excess sugar alone can do it.



Hidden sugars are common in everyday foods like bread, yogurt and breakfast cereals

WHAT HAPPENS INSIDE YOUR BODY?

When you consume sugary foods or drinks, your blood sugar rises rapidly. Your body releases insulin to bring it down and any excess is stored as fat.

Doing this occasionally is not a problem. But when it happens repeatedly, day after day, your body can become less responsive to insulin. This condition, known as Insulin resistance, is a key step toward Type 2 Diabetes.

SUGAR AND THE BRAIN

Ever noticed how hard it is to stop at just one sweet treat? Sugar stimulates reward centres in the brain, releasing dopamine – the “feel-good” chemical linked to pleasure and habit formation.

While sugar isn’t a drug in the strict sense, it can lead to cravings, frequent snacking and emotional eating. Over time, you may find yourself reaching for sugar out of habit, stress, or boredom rather than hunger.

THE SUGAR YOU DON'T SEE

The biggest challenge isn’t always the sugar you add, it’s the sugar you don’t realise you are consuming. Hidden sugars are common in

everyday foods like bread, yogurt, breakfast cereals, sauces and even “low-fat” or “diet” products.

On labels, they may appear under different names, such as sucrose, fructose, glucose syrup, maltose or cane sugar, but they all have similar effects on the body.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

The World Health Organisation recommends that added sugars make up less than 10% of daily calorie intake and ideally below 5%. For an average adult, that’s about six–nine teaspoons per day. To put that into perspective, a single soda can contain 8–12 teaspoons and even a glass of juice can rival that amount. It adds up quickly.

BUT ISN'T SUGAR PART OF LIFE?

Of course it is. Sugar is tied to celebration, culture and enjoyment – birthdays, weddings, holidays.

The goal isn’t to eliminate sugar entirely, but to put it back in its place: an occasional treat, not a daily staple.

PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN START TODAY

You don’t need drastic changes – small, consistent steps go a long way. Cutting sugary drinks is one of the most effective first moves.

Reading labels helps you spot hidden sugars, while choosing whole foods naturally keeps your intake in check.

Reducing sugar gradually allows your taste buds to adjust over time. And for children, early habits matter – less sugar now can shape healthier preferences for life.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SUGAR

Sugar is believed to have originated in Southeast Asia as early as 6000 BC, where sugarcane was first cultivated. By around 500 BC, people in India had learned to crystallise it, making it easier to store and transport.

It later spread to the Middle East and Europe through trade and conquest. By the 17th and 18th centuries, sugar production expanded rapidly in the Caribbean and the Americas, driven by plantation systems and enslaved labour.

The Industrial Revolution made sugar cheaper and widely accessible, transforming it from a luxury into a global staple – one that is now deeply embedded in modern diets and increasingly linked to today’s health challenges.