

BITTER *sweet*

It's infiltrated every meal of our day, and we're a nation that's more addicted than we think. G looks into some of the reasons why you might need to quit sugar.

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Without knowing it, you could be living on one long sugar high.

One of the most addictive substances on the planet, the average Australian consumes about 30 teaspoons of sugar a day, or a huge 45 kg per year.

"Simple sugars [those that give an instant high] are an extremely addictive substance, I regularly see clients addicted to sugar – in the forms of sweets, chocolate, sweet drinks, rice milk, and so on," says Tabitha McIntosh, nutritionist, medical scientist and founder of complementary health clinic, Awaken Your Health. "Eating sugar releases a short burst of serotonin – our feel-good neurotransmitter – and triggers a temporary sense of wellbeing within our biology, like a temporary addictive 'high'."

Studies have shown that refined sugar is in fact more addictive than cocaine; when given the choice, rats preferred to drink from a sugar-laden liquid than one with high amounts of the drug cocaine – even those mice already addicted to cocaine. Independent studies have also confirmed that sugar has a similar effect on the brain as nicotine and cocaine.

But what goes up must come down. After a temporary high, you'll feel bloated, ill and tired. But that might only be the start – there's a whole range of long-term bad effects. Plus, most foods that are high in sugar tend to be the processed, packaged ones, so have a high environmental impact as well.

McIntosh explains how sugar affects your blood sugar levels. "Foods that are high in sugar or have a high glycaemic index (GI) are quickly absorbed and cause a sharp spike in blood sugar levels, and a subsequent 'sugar-crash'. Having high blood sugar levels and poor

blood sugar control is bad for your heart health, hormonal health, liver health, can compromise your immune response, and clouds the mind – making concentration difficult and your mood inconsistent."

Some research suggests that high sugar intake can contribute to the progression of cancers, it can cause tooth decay, and it is directly linked with our nationally growing obesity problem. Doesn't sound great – so why are we eating so much of it? Australian dietary guidelines state that we shouldn't get any more than 10 per cent of our daily energy intake from sugar, yet for most Australians sugar contributes to about a quarter of our daily energy requirements, and it's provided it to us in short sharp bursts.

If our energy is sourced from foods that release it slowly instead, we won't experience that crash that affects our body and moods. McIntosh recommends eating regular meals of protein and fibre with a low to moderate GI so the "energy release is far more controlled, anchoring our mood and energy levels for up to 4–5 hours".

Avoid foods with a GI above 70. Low GI foods have a rating of between 0–55, and moderate are between 55–70. That means choosing brown bread and brown rice over white, sweet potato over normal potato, and whole fruit rather than packaged fruit juices. For more info, visit www.glycemicindex.com.

"Most nutritionists don't restrict sugars from fruit and fruit juice but they do promote the restriction of confectionary items," explains Professor Jennie Brand-Miller, biochemist and nutritionist at the University of Sydney. "I think there is a case that some foods – which I call

indulgence foods – are limited to parties ... I don't think that's true of the sugars in fruit, I think eating an orange or an apple makes you feel full, and they encourage consumption of lots of good nutrients."

Simple sugar molecules make up carbohydrates, which are an important source of fuel for the body. "We certainly do need to include carbohydrates in our diet. It is all about including the best quality carbohydrates – rather than refined sugary products like white sugar, lollies, juice, soft drinks, white flour and cheap chocolate: it's best to consume more wholegrain options and low GI fruit and vegetables," confirms McIntosh.

McIntosh recommends that people weaning themselves off sugar should "meal plan towards a whole-foods, fresh and seasonal diet which will ensure that our day-to-day sugar intake is appropriately minimal".

While there are natural sweetener alternatives such as agave, stevia and xylitol available, these have been shown to still encourage sugar cravings and dependence.

"Eliminating simple sugars; increasing complex carbohydrates from vegetables and legumes, consuming protein with each meal, and increasing your omega-3 intake can all help to keep your blood sugar levels as stable as possible."

McIntosh says to watch out for 'unassumed' sugars in most processed and packaged foods; "breakfast cereals; all juices; sweet yoghurts ... dried fruit and table sauces such as tomato sauce, sweet chilli, and BBQ sauce are unassuming, but loaded with sugar too." 'Low-fat' foods often compensate with high amounts of sugar, so choose full-fat and less processed.



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HOW I QUIT SUGAR

Realising she was addicted, health coach and writer Sarah Wilson quit sugar. Here's her tried and tested advice.

"I've known it was wrong to eat as much sugar as we do, but like everybody else, I was addicted. Studies show it takes about eight weeks for our system to detox and recalibrate, so I worked to the idea of gradually replacing sugar rather than going cold turkey. I replaced sugar with healthy fat, as it sends the message to our brain that we're satiated. I would eat more full-fat and whole-foods when quitting sugar – haloumi in the afternoon instead of sweets, loads of vegies, and instead of dessert treat myself to an extra plate of calamari, or order a plate of cheese after dinner. Basically, crowd-out your hunger for sugar by eating more of other types of food so you feel full. In the end, I lost a couple of kilos and lost my bloating, and I now have even, consistent energy." Sarah's e-book *I Quit Sugar* is available from her blog at www.sarahwilson.com.au.

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