nutrition

By Eve Douglas

a spoonful of sugar

Even before Nigel Latta condemned it on TV, we all knew sugar was not exactly “sweet as”. Bad for your teeth, responsible for piling on body fat, no nutritional value, and – if that wasn’t bad enough – a potential slippery slope towards diabetes.

And yet, consuming less sugar proved more than challenging for our family. Not only is refined sugar present in most processed food, from tomato sauce to salami, it’s also an integral part of our Western culture. Our typical breakfast is a range of sweet cereal served with milk or fruit juice. Morning tea comes with a biscuit. We may have a jam sandwich for lunch, a sweet yoghurt with fruit for afternoon tea, and what dinner would be complete without dessert? Add cold drinks, birthday cakes, and reward lollies into the mix, and it’s easy to see why breaking the habit is not an easy task.

Hosting a Chinese exchange student in our house for a fortnight helped pave the way. On her first evening with us, we asked her to stay at the table after the main meal for dessert. She was baffled. Out came our trusted Chinese Translator app. Turned out Xiaolian didn’t have a problem understanding the word: she battled with the concept. Why would you want to eat another dish when you’re already full with all the delicious food you’ve just had, she asked. We briefly considered explaining to her that Westerners had two stomachs: one for dinner and a separate one for dessert, but we realised our translator app was not up to the task, and so we opted to skip dessert altogether.

It’s not that the Chinese avoid sugar: they add it to their stir-fries, they eat sweet sticky rice and syrupy fruit as part of their main meal. But they don’t see dessert as a separate ritual to be observed.

Once you get your head around not expecting sugar at certain times of the day, it becomes easier to schedule it less often. My children started copying Xiaolian’s behaviour, and now if we feel like having something sweet, we’re learning to stop and think whether a piece of chocolate cake or a handful of macadamia nuts will suffice – or even a glass of water would satisfy the craving.

It’s not that all sweet food is bad for you, of course. Milk, fruit, and vegetables all contain natural sugars, and it’s beneficial to include a variety of them in your diet. We should be careful with fruit juices, though, even those that are of no-sugar-added 100%-pure-juice variety. Boyd Swinburn, professor of global health and nutrition at the University of Auckland says that squeezed fruit juice has no fibre, so it’s easy to drink the equivalent of five oranges in one sitting. Eating five whole oranges wouldn’t be such a problem, but if you squeeze them, the acid and sugar occur in a finely concentrated form, which is murder for your teeth.

Cane sugar and corn syrup are even more of a health hazard, especially if you eat too much of them in one form or another. While there is no precise figure for how much sugar people should be eating, the World Health Organisation’s new proposal is that sugar – including sugar from fruit juice – should not constitute more than 5 percent of daily calories. So the maximum for an average man would be eight 4.2g teaspoons a day, and for the average woman six teaspoons a day.

If that sounds like a lot of sugar to be had in a day, here are some figures:

- Drink a 355ml can of Coca Cola and you’ll be consuming 10 teaspoons of sugar, far above the recommended daily dose. (That’s not counting the sugar in your ham or in your bread.)
- 1 Tablespoon of tomato sauce contains approximately a teaspoon of sugar.
- If you eat a whole 58g bar of Milky Way you’ll exceed the recommended daily amount, because you’ll be ingesting 8.5 teaspoons of sugar.
- Even a cup of Kellogg’s Special K contains one teaspoon of sugar.

With all that in mind, you might wonder whether your child really needs a muffin or biscuit in their lunchbox every day. Perhaps if they’re going to have a sweet snack after school, you should consider sending only savoury carbohydrates to school – teamed with heaps of fresh fruit and vegetables, of course.

Simply being aware of your child’s overall sugar consumption, and knowing how much sugar hides in takeaways and processed foods, will help you in your journey towards a healthier family diet. Especially when you ban the sugary drinks that are soooo bad on the teeth, and replace them with good old-fashioned water.

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