


Sickly sweet

It has been called toxic,
addictive and deadly.
Is sugar really that bad,
asks Tiffany O'Callaghan





IMAGINE you are sitting at a table with a bag of sugar, a teaspoon and a glass of water. You open the bag and add a spoonful of sugar to the water. Then another, and another, and another, until you have added 20 teaspoons. Would you drink the water?

Even the most sweet-toothed kid would find it unpalatably sickly. And yet that is the amount of sugar you are likely to eat today, and every day – usually without realising it.

Sugar was once a luxury ingredient reserved for special occasions. But in recent years it has become a large and growing part of our diets. If you eat processed food of any kind, it probably contains added sugar. Three-quarters of the packaged food sold in US supermarkets has had sugar added to it during manufacturing. You can find it in sliced bread, breakfast cereals, salad dressings, soups, cooking sauces and many other staples. Low-fat products often contain a lot of added sugar.

It's hardly controversial to say that all this sugar is probably doing us no good. Now, though, sugar is being touted as public health enemy number one: as bad if not worse than fat, and the major driving force behind obesity, heart disease and type II diabetes. Some researchers even contend that sugar is toxic or addictive.

As a result, health bodies are gearing up for a "war on sugar". The World Health Organization wants us to cut consumption radically. In the US, doctors and scientists are pressing food companies to reduce sugar and be more open about how much they add; in the UK a group called Action on Sugar has just launched a campaign to ratchet down sugar. Politicians are mulling taxes on sugary drinks. But is sugar really that bad? Or is it all a storm in a teacup – with two sugars please?

When nutrition scientists talk about sugar they are not fretting about sugars found naturally in food such as fruit and vegetables, or the lactose in milk. Instead they are worried about added sugar, usually in the form of sucrose (table sugar) or high-fructose corn syrup (see "Sugar basics", page 36).

Our early ancestors would have been totally unfamiliar with these refined forms of sugar, and until relatively recently sugar was a rare and precious commodity. Only in the 1700s, after Europeans had introduced sugar cane ➤

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