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Added sugar in kids' diets: How much is too much?

by Trisha Koriath, Staff Writer

As the song goes, "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." But to help your family stay healthy, you might want to step away from the sweet stuff.

Eating and drinking too much added sugar puts kids at risk for obesity, tooth decay, heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and fatty liver disease, among other health problems, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Families should focus on foods and drinks that do not have added sugar, the AAP advises.

Sugar often is added to processed, packaged food and drinks while they are being made or at the table.

Added sugar is becoming easier to spot on nutrition labels. Many foods now list added sugar separately. You also can find added sugar by reading the ingredients. It comes in many forms, including brown sugar, corn sweetener, corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, honey dextrose, fruit juice concentrates, invert sugar, malt sugar, molasses, raw sugar, turbinado and ingredients ending in "-ose."

The average child eats and drinks much more added sugar than he should. On average, sugar makes up 17% of what children consume each day. Half of that comes from drinks with added sugar.

How can you reduce added sugar in your child's diet? The AAP offers the following suggestions:

- Aim for less than 25 grams (about 6 teaspoons) of added sugar per day for children 2 years of age and older. Avoid serving food and drinks with added sugar to children under 2 years of age.
- Serve water and milk instead of soda, sports drinks, sweet tea, sweetened coffee and fruit drinks. Milk contains natural sugar (lactose). It also provides calcium, protein, vitamin D and other nutrients that children need.
- Watch out for hidden sources of added sugar in processed food like ketchup, dried cranberries, salad dressing and baked beans.
- Satisfy your child's sweet tooth with whole fruit.
- Limit 100% fruit juice. It has more sugar per serving than whole fruit. The AAP recommends *no more than* 4 ounces of 100% fruit juice a day for children ages 1 through 3 years; 4 to 6 ounces for children ages 4 through 6; and 8 ounces for children ages 7 through 14. Do not give fruit juice to infants under 1 year old.

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