

How to cut down on sugar

A little sugar is okay but many of us are having way more than we need.

On average, Kiwi adults have 10½ to 14 teaspoons of sugar a day – double the recommended amount.

Most of this sugar comes from packaged everyday foods and drinks.

There are two types of sugar in food – intrinsic sugars and free sugars.

Intrinsic sugars are found naturally in whole fruit, vegetables, and milk.

Free sugars are:

- added to food and drinks.
- naturally present in honey, syrups (golden syrup and maple syrup), unsweetened fruit juices, and fruit concentrates.



Sugar and health

Eating or drinking too many free sugars can lead to health problems such as:

- weight gain and obesity (which, in turn, can increase the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers)
- high triglycerides (a type of fat that can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke)
- tooth decay.

Foods high in free sugars provide lots of calories (energy) but little nutritional value.

Some foods high in free sugars such as biscuits, cakes, and ice cream can also contain unhealthy fats such as butter, cream, coconut, and palm oil. Sugar in a liquid form is not as filling as sugar in food – which means if you drink a sugary drink you don't compensate by eating less food.

You don't need to cut down on sugar found in whole fruit, vegetables and milk. These foods contain lots of nutrients such as vitamins and minerals that are good for you.

How much sugar can I have?

Experts recommend you limit free sugars to:

- adults – no more than 6 teaspoons a day
- children – no more than 3 teaspoons a day.



This applies to sugars you add and those added in packaged foods, and sugar present in honey, syrups, fruit juices, and fruit concentrates.

It does not apply to intrinsic sugars found naturally in whole fruit, vegetables, and milk.

What foods and drinks are high in sugar?

Drinks

Many drinks are high in sugar. The following can contain 5 to 7 teaspoons of sugar in a 250 ml glass:

- soft drinks
- fruit juice
- cordials
- flavoured milks
- sports drinks
- energy drinks.

For more information, see Health Promotion Agency – How much sugar in that drink?

Food

High sugar foods include many:

- biscuits
- cakes
- muesli bars
- puddings
- ice cream.
- yoghurt
- sweets
- chocolate
- breakfast cereals

Some savoury foods such as sauces, dressings, chutneys, and takeaway foods can also contain a lot of sugar.

How can I tell if a packaged food or drink is high in sugar?

Check the nutrition information panel:

- High-sugar foods contain more than 15 g of sugar per 100 g. Low-sugar foods contain less than 5 g per 100 g.
- If sugar is near the top of the ingredients list, the food or drink will be high in sugar.
- Look out for other common names for sugar added to foods:
 - corn syrup
 - dextrose
 - fructose
 - glucose
 - sucrose
 - maltose.
 - honey
 - invert sugar
 - golden syrup
 - maple syrup
 - treacle



Ways to cut back on sugar

- Drink water (tap water, soda, or mineral water) or low-fat milk instead of fruit juice and sugary drinks.
- Avoid sugary breakfast cereals. Have a plain cereal such as porridge or Weet-Bix. Add fresh or frozen fruit for sweetness.
- Choose snacks low in added sugar such as fresh fruit, low-fat cheese and wholegrain crackers, vegetable sticks, and hummus or unsalted nuts.
- Swap flavoured and fruit yoghurts for plain, unsweetened yoghurt. Add fresh or frozen fruit for flavour.
- Keep cakes, biscuits, sweet pastries, chocolate, lollies, ice cream, and puddings for occasional treats.
- Reduce sugar in recipes. Start by cutting back to three-quarters the amount the recipe suggests.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Endorsed by Healthy Eating Healthy Ageing Project dietitian, Canterbury DHB. Last reviewed October 2018.