

Sugar's Role in Diet

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Can we do without added dietary sugar? We can! Sugar is not indispensable. The ultimate choice of what to include in the diet is up to the individual. That choice may be based on a number of factors, but any presumed health benefits should be proven by research and any changes should not cause harm. If sugar intake was reduced and not replaced, then the resulting fall in energy intake could well benefit people whose energy intake was too high. Some people may benefit if sugar intake was totally replaced by high fibre-containing cereals, legumes, vegetables or fruits. However, none of these patterns occur to any extent. Lessening sugar intake actually results in eating more fat. This has become known as the "sugar/fat see-saw". Any elevation of intake tends to make the diet more promotive of obesity, coronary heart disease and certain cancers. Interestingly, recent research has shown that in terms of palatability and satiety, it is far easier to over eat fat than sugar. A high intake of sugar is sometimes seen as negative as it is thought to displace other foods and hence to lessen the intake of foods rich in micronutrients. Examination of the evidence has revealed that this does not necessarily occur; several studies have shown that the intake of micronutrients by people with a high sugar intake is actually higher than in those people with a low sugar intake. For practical reasons it is difficult to reduce sugar intake and increase fibre intake, as some recommend. Many fibre rich foods are bland and need the addition of sugar or fat to improve palatability. Many have a high energy density, a negative factor when children with high energy needs consume these foods as a central part of each meal. This can be rectified simply, for example by the addition of energy dense foods, such as sugar and oil to porridge. The balance of a diet should not only be measured by the nutrient value, but also by the cost and taste.* Adapted from South African Sugar Association (SASA) website