Putting it in Perspective: New Research Confirms Reducing Overall Caloric Intake Should Be Our Focus

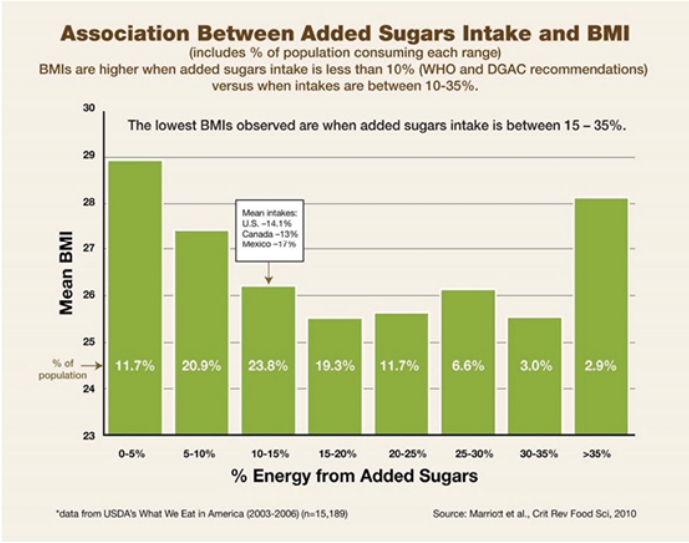
News by the Spoonful
from The Sugar Association, Inc.

Focusing on a single nutrient in the fight against obesity doesn't work. Emphasizing overall calories should be our focus, according to new research from the University of Glasgow.[1]

The researchers examined the diets of more than 100,000 people in the UK who are part of an ongoing health study. They found that obesity is more strongly associated with total energy intake than any individual macronutrient, with fat being the biggest contributor to caloric intake and the macronutrient with the strongest link to obesity. There is a positive, but weak, correlation between obesity and absolute energy derived from sugar but after controlling for calories, fat remains positively associated with obesity while sugar is negatively associated (meaning sugar intake and body weight are inversely related when calories are equal).

"The critical message is that people need to reduce their overall calories," says Jill Pell, the director of the Institute of Health and Wellbeing and co-lead author of the report.

The inverse relationship between added sugars intake and body weight is supported by existing data from the United States that are rarely seen. Those who consume the lowest percentage of calories from added sugars (0-5% of calories) are the most overweight (see chart).[2,3] An analysis of data from USDA's "What We Eat in America" by Marriott et al found those who consume 0-10% of calories from added sugars have higher BMI's (an index for assessing overweight and underweight) than those whose calorie intake is composed of 10-35% from added sugars. [2]



All macronutrients contribute calories, including sugar. But there is nothing unique about the calories from sugar when it comes to body weight. The association between sugar intake and obesity occurs only when it contributes to excess energy consumption, rather than a specific effect of sugar.[4] The problem with focusing on one nutrient as the cause of obesity is what researchers have observed for decades: when consumption decreases for one macronutrient, individuals compensate by increasing consumption of another.[5] This compensation that leads to a see-saw effect, especially between fat and sugar, is the result of focusing on one nutrient instead of a meaningful reduction of total caloric intake.

The researchers warn, "Focusing public health messages on sugar consumption may mislead the public on the need to reduce fat intake and overall energy intake."

It is time the dialogue shifts to meaningful solutions to obesity. FDA had it right 10 years ago when they launched "Calories Count."[6] How did we get off track?

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1 Anderson JJ, Celis-Morales CA, Mackay DF, et al. Adiposity among 132,479 UK Biobank participants; contribution of sugar intake vs other macronutrients. International Journal of Epidemiology. 2016:1-10. doi: 10.1093/ije/dyw173

2 Marriott BP, Olsho L, Hadden L, Conner P. Intake of added sugars and selected nutrients in the United State, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 2003-2006. Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition. 2010;50(3):228-258.

3 Just & Wansink. Fast food, soft drink and candy intake is unrelated to body mass index for 95% of American adults. Obesity Science & Practice. 2015;126-130.

4 Kahn R, Sievenpiper JL. Dietary Sugar and body weight: have we reached a crisis in the epidemic of obesity? We have, but the pox on sugar is overwrought and overworked. Diabetes Care. 2014;37:957-62.

5 Bray GA, Popkin BM. Dietary fat intake does affect obesity! American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. 1998;68:1157-73.

6 CFSAN, FDA, Calories Count: Report of the Working Group on Obesity (Mar. 12, 2004) [hereinafter CFSAN, FDA, Calories Count], available at http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/owg-toc.html.

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