

How much sugar are we consuming?



There is a lot of talk about the risks of overconsumption of added sugars in foods, but exactly how much is too much? How much sugar are we eating and which foods are they coming from? Who are those most likely to be eating too much? How do we meet intake recommendations?

Measuring sugar intakes

National Surveys

Data on what we eat is collected by the Government in a large national survey in which thousands of people participate. Detailed information on food and drink eaten, physical activity and other health information is collected by trained researchers by phone or by interview. In Australia and New Zealand these surveys are carried out every couple of years.

Apparent Consumption

Apparent consumption is the total amount of sugar sold for household or commercial use, which includes:

1. 'Loose' table sugar
2. Sugar added to manufactured food and drinks, takeaways and restaurant meals
3. Imports and exports of sugar

This way of measuring consumption looks at what is available for consumption, not actual intake.

Added & Free Sugars

The data on added and free sugar consumption was determined through a 10-step classification process – a methodology recently devised by researchers. This method was used to estimate added and free sugar values of food products and then used in the analysis of dietary intake data. Prior to this, dietary surveys have been unable to quantify added or free sugar consumption as there are no analytical methods that distinguish between sugar added to foods by manufacturers and sugars inherent in foods.

How much are we eating?

- In New Zealand the figure was 57 grams per day (median value for free sugars) in 2009. This is about 11% of the total kilojoules consumed per day.
- In Australia, the mean daily free sugar intake was 60 grams per day, contributing 10.9% of total energy intake in 2011/12.



Where is sugar in our diets?

The majority of free sugars in the diet come from discretionary or occasional foods. In New Zealand, sugar and sweets are the highest contributors (23%) followed by non-alcoholic beverages (16%). The main sources of free sugars in the Australian diet were:

- Soft drinks and sports drinks (19%)
- Pastries, biscuits, cakes, muffins, scones and cake-type desserts (14%)
- Fruit juice and fruit drinks (13%)
- Sugar, honey and syrups (11.6%)
- Confectionary and cereal/nut/fruit/seed bars (8.7%)

DID YOU KNOW?

Teenage boys have the highest intake of added sugars, mostly from soft drinks, sports and energy drinks.



Definitions

Total Sugars includes those sugars naturally present in foods such as fruit and milk as well as the sugars added in processed foods and beverages

Added sugars: All monosaccharides and disaccharides added to foods by the manufacturer, cook, or consumer.

Free sugars: Includes all added sugars plus the sugars naturally present in honey, syrups and fruit juices.



How does our intake compare with recommendations?

Advice of the Australian Dietary Guidelines is to 'limit foods and drinks containing added sugars', The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends less than 10% of total energy should come from free sugars.

On average, Aussies come close to meeting the WHO recommendations for free sugars. Mean usual intake is 10.9% compared to 10% recommended. This equals 14 teaspoons vs

13 teaspoons. Overall, 52% of people exceed the WHO recommendations however it is unclear by how much the recommendation is exceeded.

According to the last national nutrition survey in New Zealand, mean free sugar intakes were about 11% of energy – very similar to intakes in Australia.

How to meet recommendations

Added sugars intakes have been going down over time. The largest decline was seen recently among children who had a big dip in sugar sweetened beverages.

Overall, less discretionary or occasional treat foods and drinks is needed if we are to get closer to recommendations. Current intakes are too high. These foods and drinks should be limited to small amounts only.

Research shows that a focus on discretionary or treat foods as a group can have even greater benefits beyond general sugar reduction. Less treat foods means less added sugars, but also less energy or kilojoules in the diet. It also means less saturated fat, alcohol and sodium. This can be a win win for an overall healthy dietary pattern.

THE SHORT AND SWEET OF IT

1. Data on what we eat is collected by the Government in a national survey where thousands of people provide information on food and drink eaten, physical activity and other information.
2. Both Australia and New Zealand come close to meeting the WHO recommendations for free sugars.
3. Most of our free sugar intake comes from discretionary or "junk" foods in our diet.
4. Dietary Guidelines recommend limiting food and drinks containing added sugars.
5. Less discretionary or treat foods will help reduce added sugars in the diet, as well as saturated fat and sodium, for an overall better dietary pattern.

For individual health advice see a qualified health professional.

Further Reading

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Australian health survey: Consumption of Added Sugars, Australia 2011-12. April 2016.
2. Ministry of Health. Eating and activity guidelines. <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/eating-and-activity-guidelines>.
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4. Lei et al. 2016 Dietary Intake and Food Sources of Added Sugar in the Australian Population. *Br J Nutr*. 2016 Mar 14;115(5):868-77. doi: 10.1017/S0007114515005255.
5. National Health and Medical Research Council. Australian Dietary Guidelines. Canberra, ACT; 2013.
6. University of Otago and Ministry of Health. A Focus on Nutrition: Key findings of the 2008/09 New Zealand Adult Nutrition Survey. Wellington: Ministry of Health; 2011.



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