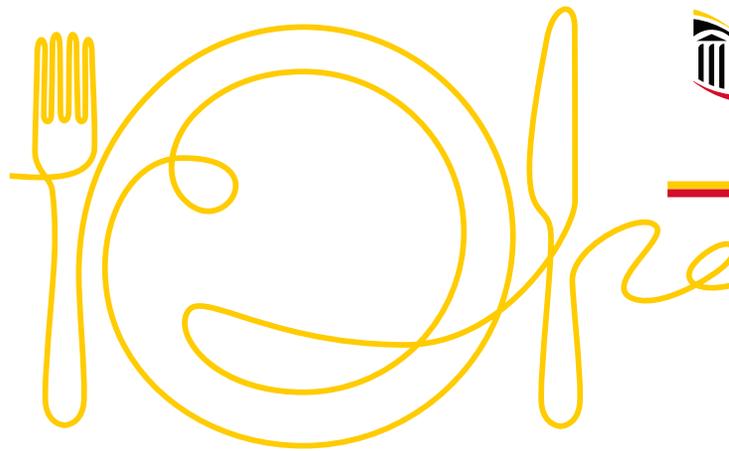


the real dish

with *Lauren*
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Sweet Talk: Making Sense of Added Sugars



AT SOME point following your diagnosis, you've probably heard it said that "Sugar feeds cancer." It's become such a common saying that many people with cancer assume that it's true and try to cut out sugar from their diets as soon as they are diagnosed.

However, the truth (as usual) is a lot more nuanced. In the body, carbohydrates are broken down into sugar, or glucose. All cells need glucose, and the brain especially needs glucose to function. If there's not enough glucose coming in, the body will begin to break down proteins and turn them into glucose. Those proteins already had important functions in our muscles and our immune system, so not getting enough glucose actually leads to weakening in the rest of the body. Cancer cells are, unfortunately, hypermetabolic, meaning they're extra active, so they take whatever fuel they want first. Unfortunately, we can't starve the cancer cells without also depriving our healthy cells. So we need carbohydrates as part of our balanced diet. Carbohydrates are found in starchy foods that most of us think of as carbs (breads, pasta, rice, etc.), but vegetables and fruits are also carbohydrates, and even milk/dairy products contain carbohydrates.

Keep an Eye Out for "Hidden" Sugars

When we talk about sugar, we have to be more precise. People often refer to sugar as granulated white sugar and think of it as the stuff in pastries and candy ... But we really need to be talking about *all* added sugars.



"Added sugars" include:

- Sugars added during food processing (like in baked goods, packaged foods, sauces/dressings, etc.)
- Foods packaged as sweeteners (coconut sugar, agave, etc.)
- Sugars in syrups and honey
- Sugars from concentrated fruit juices

This means that just because a product is using a "natural" sweetener doesn't mean it's better for you or less sweet than its granulated sugar alternative. Recipes that say "no sugar added," but that still include honey or maple syrup are misleading because those sweeteners still count as added sugars. You can choose whatever sweetener you prefer the taste of or that might add a little different flavor, but added sugars are still added sugars even if they're "natural" or are different from granulated sugar.

Mindfulness and moderation are key.

Take the time to notice and appreciate when you treat yourself.

How much sugar is too much sugar?

People often ask me if it's okay for them to have a particular food. But dietitians aren't the food police and I firmly believe that every person gets to decide for themselves what they want to eat.



Ultimately the recommendations are to limit added sugars in our diet, and the Nutrition Facts label has been updated to include a specific line item to tell us how much added sugar is in a serving of that

food. Mostly we want to limit added sugars because they can push out more nutrient-dense foods from our diet. Most people aren't close to eating the daily recommended amount of fruits, vegetables, or fiber, and if we're filling up on foods that tend to be higher in sugars and lower in nutrients, we miss out on the opportunities for those more nutritious options. That's why I like to focus on [ADDING in nutritious foods](#) rather than restricting.

Of course there are times when we want to have added sugar in our diets. We celebrate, grieve, share, and build community around food. Sometimes patients need those calories to help maintain weight during treatment, or only crave those highly palatable foods when they're feeling ill. Unfortunately, sometimes those are the only foods available to people and

eating something high in sugar is better than not eating at all. All of those are valid reasons to choose the foods we choose. We don't have to avoid sugar because it's going to "feed cancer." We want to choose a variety of nutritious foods that we enjoy, have access to, and feel good eating.

[Eating foods mindfully](#) can help us get the full enjoyment out of our food. If you're having a celebration or having a food that you don't normally get to eat all the time, really take the time to notice and appreciate it.



What about alternative sweeteners?

Artificial sweeteners have been getting a lot of media attention since the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) labeled aspartame "possibly carcinogenic [or potentially cancer-causing] to humans." This raised a lot of concern about the safety of diet beverages, as well as other uses for artificial sweeteners. As with all things, it's important to remember that the dose makes the poison.

IARC reviews research to identify the potential of a substance to cause harm; therefore it doesn't consider the dose that is a risk. Based on [their review of the research](#), they concluded that there is limited evidence that aspartame



Cutting back on the “extras” in your coffees and teas is one way to help gradually lower your sugar intake.

causes cancer in humans, which classifies aspartame as a [level 2B](#). The World Health Organization (WHO) and Food and Agriculture Organization Joint Expert Committee of Food Additives (JECFA) reviewed the evidence and concluded that the previously established limit of 0-40mg/kg body weight of aspartame is safe.

In practical terms, this would be equivalent to about 15 cans of diet soda a day for someone weighing 170lbs. While aspartame can be found in a variety of foods, from cereal to cough drops to diet ice cream, one can still consume quite a large variety of these products without surpassing the safety limit. Whether you choose a diet option or a full-sugar option, keep in mind your portion size and what other foods or beverages could add more nutrition into your day. If you're trying to cut back on added sugars it'll take a little extra research when doing your usual grocery shopping. Check the Nutrition Facts portion of food labels for “Added Sugars” and you might be surprised what products are hiding high amounts of sugar:

- Yoplait Strawberry yogurt has 13g added sugar, whereas Chobani Less Sugar Greek yogurt has just 5g added sugar, whereas a plain (unflavored) yogurt has no added sugars.
- Canned mandarin oranges in light syrup contains 17g added sugar, whereas canned mandarin oranges in 100% juice has no added sugars.

Similarly, consider adjusting sweetness levels if you're ordering beverages when dining out:

- Tropical Smoothie adds sugar (or stevia upon request) to their smoothies, but you can ask for light or no sugar added.
- Customizing Starbucks or Dunkin' beverages can also help reduce the added sugars. Over time, taste buds adapt, so cutting back one “shot” of syrup at a time is another way you can reduce added sugars little by little.
- Juice is another sneaky place to find added sugars. If a juice doesn't advertise that it's 100% fruit juice, it likely has added sugar, so check that Nutrition Fact label to be sure.

According to the Analysis of [What We Eat in America](#), 24% of the added sugars in the American diet are coming from sugar-sweetened beverages. Mindfulness around what we're drinking can help us get the most enjoyment out of our food AND our beverages and help reduce habitual or mindless intake that's not serving us.



What tips do you have for reducing added sugars in your diet? What foods or drinks are worth the added sugars to you? Share your

great advice on the [UM St. Joseph Medical Center Barbara L Posner Wellness & Support Center](#) Facebook Group.