

Eating sugar makes me sweat — why? ^[1]

Dear Alice:

I have noticed that whenever I eat certain sugary foods — especially chocolates and hard candies — I break out into a cold sweat and feel extremely uncomfortable for about half an hour. I have no problem, however, with pure cane sugar (when I drink coffee or tea, for example). Is this a normal adrenaline reaction to sugar, or a certain type of sugar?

— Candy Lover

Answer

Dear Candy Lover,

There are a few reasons your sweet tooth's love of candy might lead to the discomfort you described. One of the reasons that you may have different reactions to different sugary foods is that some sugars are actually sweeter than others. Sucrose, which is table sugar and is in most sweets, is 1.0 on a relative sweetness scale. Invert sugar, sucrose broken down into glucose and fructose, which is in hard candies and some honey, is 1.3 on a relative sweetness scale. Fructose, in fruit, some honey, and some soft drinks, is 1.7 on the sweetness scale — almost twice as sweet as sucrose.

Another possible reason for a stronger reaction to candy than to pure cane sugar may have to do with the amount consumed. A typical candy bar contains 24 grams of sugar, the equivalent of 6 teaspoons. To calculate the number of teaspoons of sugar in a serving of food, check the food label then divide the grams of sugar listed by four to get the number of teaspoons sugar.

There is also a condition called reactive hypoglycemia ^[2], which is characterized by irritability, nervousness, headache, sweating, and confusion some two to four hours after eating a meal high in simple sugars. In severe cases, fainting can occur. It is not clear what causes reactive hypoglycemia, but it may be caused by the pancreas' overproduction of insulin in response to rising blood glucose levels. While true food allergies are quite rare, some people may be allergic to sugar or to another ingredient in candy and chocolate. Is it possible you're reacting to a specific type of sweetener or something besides the sugar in the candy and chocolate you eat?

How to manage these symptoms? Moderation is the key. Limit sugar intake to ten percent or less of your total calorie intake. That would allow ten teaspoons (40 grams) per day on a 2000 calorie diet. Consider these tips:

At the supermarket

- Read ingredient labels. Identify added sugars in a product (which may be listed as sugar, cane sugar, crystallized evaporated cane juice, high fructose corn syrup, corn syrup, honey, syrup, molasses, and so on). Try to select items lower in total sugar when possible.
- Buy fresh fruits or fruits packed in water, juice or light syrup rather than in heavy syrup.
- Buy fewer foods that are high in refined sugar such as prepared baked goods, candies, sweet desserts, soft drinks, and fruit-flavored punches and drinks. Substitute vanilla wafers, graham crackers, bagels, English muffins, and diet soft drinks, for overly sugary treats.
- Buy nuts (dry roasted), sunflower seeds, and air-popped popcorn or baked tortilla chips to replace candy for snacks.

In the kitchen

- Experiment with spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, coriander, nutmeg, ginger, and mace to replace sugar for sweetness and flavor in foods. (This also works well with plain yogurt instead of buying a sweetened variety).
- Use home-made foods with less sugar whenever possible rather than commercially prepared food that is higher in sugar. For example, whip up your own tomato sauce for pasta rather than using a store-bought sauce that likely contains sugar.

At the table

- Reach for fruit instead of a sweet for dessert or for a snack.
- Add less sugar to your foods — coffee, tea, cereal, or fruit. Get used to using half as much sugar, then see if you can cut back even more.
- Cut back on the number of sugared drinks. Substitute water, seltzer water, or unsweetened tea.
- Eat several small meals and snacks throughout the day
- Be sure to eat if you are drinking alcohol and avoid using sugary drinks as mixers

If these tips do not seem to help with your sugar sweats, you may want to consult your health care provider to rule out any other more serious medical conditions.

Here's to your sweet tooth,

Alice!

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