

PROJECT LEAN: Watch out for added sugars

Joyce Houston/For the Times-Standard
Posted: 06/09/2009 06:51:12 PM PDT

Did you know that soft drinks are the number one source of added sugar in the American diet? "Added sugar" means extra sugar that has been added to foods or beverages. Every day, nearly one-third of all calories from added sugars come from sweetened beverages.

That isn't really hard to believe when considering how popular soda, juice, smoothies, specialty coffees and energy drinks have become. Jonna Kitchen, registered dietitian with Project LEAN, offers in this week's article some important things to think about during our warmer months ahead.

U.S. teens now drink twice as much soda as milk. Some of the biggest calorie culprits these days come in the form of fancy coffee drinks and smoothies packing close to a 500-calorie punch. Americans actually consume almost 175 pounds of sugar a year -- almost half a pound of sugar a day or 57 cubes of sugar.

Why is all this sugar such a problem? Drinking just one 20-ounce bottle of soda each day for a year can result in a 27-pound weight gain.

It's not too surprising that almost two out of three Americans are either overweight or obese, not to mention what all of this sugar is doing to our teeth.

Where did all of the added sugar come from? Originally, most sugar in the American diet came from sugar cane or sugar beets. But in the early 1980s, high fructose corn syrup made its way into the American food chain. Around the same time, obesity rates started to rapidly rise.

Some researchers believe that high fructose corn syrup may be processed by our bodies differently than other sugars, and are accusing it of being a major cause of the nation's obesity epidemic. But most experts believe that the problem with high fructose corn syrup is that it is so cheap to make that it has been added to all sorts of foods. Hence we are eating far too much sugar -- and we don't even realize it. All of these extra, empty calories are helping us become more and more overweight.

Most consumers would be surprised to learn that when reading a food or drink label, approximately every five grams of sugar is equal to one teaspoon or one cube of sugar. The average 20-ounce soda contains close to 70 grams of sugar. So, if you divide the total number of sugar grams (70) by five, you find that there are about 14 teaspoons of sugar in that 20 ounces of soda.

Most people wouldn't dream of mixing 14 teaspoons of sugar into a glass of water and drinking it, but that is exactly what they are consuming with a soda.

Eating other high-sugar, processed foods like breakfast cereals, granola bars sweetened yogurt, cookies and candy contribute even more sugar to our diet. Sugar can be sneaky because it comes in many disguises. Learn to read "Nutrition Facts" labels very carefully.

Here are some tips on how to tell if your food or beverages are sweetened, and how to reduce your sugar intake:

* Common words that also mean sugar include: barley malt, brown sugar, cane juice, evaporated cane juice, corn syrup, dextrose, fructose, glucose, sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, honey, maltodextrin, agave syrup, maple syrup, molasses, powdered sugar, raw sugar.

Quite often there is more than one source of sugar included in the ingredient list, and the closer they are to the beginning of the ingredient list, the larger their quantities. Try to minimize your use of processed foods with long lists of ingredients.

* The easiest way to reduce sugar in one's diet is to choose more whole foods like vegetables and fruits -- fresh, frozen or canned; whole grains such as oats, barley, quinoa, brown rice, bulgur and wheat berries; and low-fat proteins including poultry without skin, grass-fed lean beef, lean cuts of pork, fish, soy, beans, nuts and seeds.

* Drink more water (especially from the tap), and choose more nonfat or low-fat milk. All of these whole foods supply us with our essential nutrients and can be very satisfying.

* The beverages of choice are water, even from the tap, nonfat or low-fat milk and 100 percent fruit juice.

Bottled water is not necessarily any cleaner or safer than water from the tap. In fact, 25 percent or more of bottled water is really just "tap water in a bottle." It often lacks fluoride, which is essential for dental health, creates a lot of environmental waste and isn't regulated nearly as strictly as tap water.

* Nonfat or low-fat milk is another important beverage to include daily. It provides essential sources of vitamins and minerals, namely calcium and vitamin D, plus plenty of protein.

* Juice should be limited to no more than one cup per day. In larger amounts, it also provides too many calories. Remember that sweet foods can have a place in a healthy diet, just in moderation.

Take charge of your health and join the “Rethink Your Drink” campaign efforts this summer to reduce your sugar intake. For more information about Rethink Your Drink, check out <http://www.northcoastnutrition.org>.

Try the following smoothie at home, and experiment with a variety of different fruit combinations:

Fruit Smoothies

(adapted from “Lunch Lessons”)

- 3 large, ripe bananas
- 1 1/2 cups chopped fresh or canned pineapple (canned in juice, drained)
- 1 1/2 cups calcium-fortified orange juice
- 1 1/2 cups plain nonfat yogurt
- 1/4 cup ground flax seed (optional)
- 16-18 ice cubes

Combine fruit, juice and yogurt in blender and process until smooth.

Add ice cubes and ground flax seeds and re-process until smooth.

Makes eight 1-cup servings, with 125 calories per cup, 2 g fat (0.19 g saturated fat, 0 g trans fat), 28 mg sodium, 3 g fiber, 27 g carbohydrate, 4 g protein.

Joyce Houston is the Humboldt County public health nutritionist, a registered dietitian and the director of North Coast Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition), which is coordinated locally by the Humboldt County Department of Health and Human Services as a joint effort with the California Department of Health. For more information, call 441-4652

See article at http://www.times-standard.com/lifestyle/ci_12556410