Sweet and Sneaky

It's in cereal, milk shakes, pasta sauce and even potato chips: sugar's everywhere, and it's bad for your teeth!

By Julia Aitken

Chow down on something sweet and the sugar provides food for your mouth's bacteria which then produce acids to attack your teeth. No wonder dentists want us to reduce the sugar in our diets!

Perhaps you have cut back on candy and pop but there are lots of other sources of sugar. Many processed foods contain it (see "Sneaky Sugar") and in its 2004 *Canadian Community Health Survey*, Statistics Canada estimated that the average Canadian ingests about 30 pounds of sugar each year from manufactured products. A recent article in *The Globe and Mail*[1] quoted Statistics Canada as stating that Canadian children, ranging in age from one to 13, get more than 25 percent of their daily calories from sugar — more than any other age group.

Cutting down on processed foods helps, but there are other natural-sounding sources of sugar that may surprise you. Dr. Deborah Saunders, a dentist practising in Sudbury, Ont., suggests limiting our intake of dried fruit as it is concentrated and retentive in nature. The "stickiness" of some foods plays a key role, she explains. Anything that is high in carbohydrates can be broken down by plaque bacteria. The byproduct of that bacteria is acid, which demineralizes your teeth, leading to tooth sensitivity and cavities. "Would you eat two cups of fresh grapes?" she asks. "Probably not, but that's equivalent in sugar to eating less than one-quarter cup of raisins."

But, does avoiding sweet things mean fresh fruit is off-limits? Absolutely not, says ODA President-Elect Dr. Rick Caldwell, a general-practice dentist in New Liskeard, Ont. "The key to snacking on naturally sweet foods, such as fruit, is to eat it over a short period of time to reduce the amount of time your teeth are exposed to acid," he explains.

For advice on a balanced diet, reach for the *Canada Food Guide*, says Dr. Arthur Worth, President of the Ontario Dental Association and a general practitioner in Thamesville, Ont. "You do need fruit in your diet," he says, "but don't eat it in excess. Tangerines are fine but having five or six in one day might harm your teeth."

1 *The Globe and Mail* – "Junk is the new normal." March 25, 2013

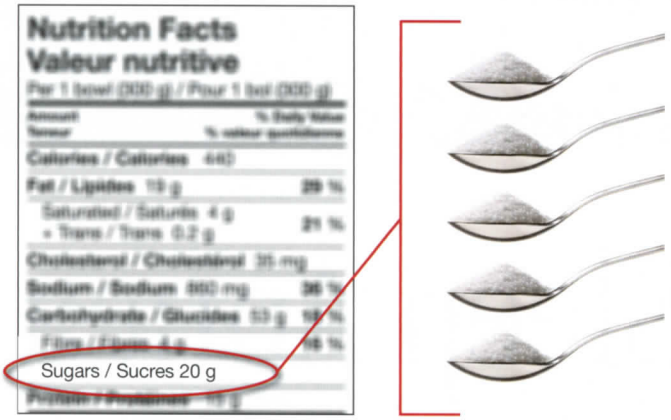
If you can't resist a sugary treat, Dr. Ian McConnachie, a pediatric dentist in Ottawa, has some advice. "Eat it with a meal rather than on its own, because the higher saliva flow that occurs during a meal will neutralize the acids that develop when you have sugar."

Always brush after eating any snack or rinse your mouth with water. In a pinch, says Dr. McConnachie, chew on sugarless gum, such as one sweetened with xylitol, a natural sugar substitute which may help to remineralize tooth enamel. Sweet!

Do the (Scary) Math!

Dr. Don Dempsey, President of the New Brunswick Dental Society, who has a general dental practice in Bathurst, N.B., suggests this easy way to figure out how much sugar a product contains:

One teaspoonful of granulated sugar weighs four grams. If a product's label tells you that an item contains, say, 20 grams of sugar per portion, divide the number of grams by four to find out the number of teaspoonfuls. In this case, **it would be five teaspoonfuls of sugar per portion!**



The Low-Fat Trap

The fat in food makes it taste good so some manufacturers add flavour to low-fat products by bumping up the sugar. Choosing a low-fat muffin over a donut at our favourite coffee shop is a given for most of us. But take a look at the nutritional information for the following: (The low-fat muffin is probably still a good choice, but who would have thought it contained that much sugar?)

Berry Muffin	340 calories	11 g fat	**25 g sugar** (6.25 tsp)
Low-Fat Berry Muffin	290 calories	2.5 g fat	**30 g sugar** (7.5 tsp)
Honey Dip Donut	210 calories	8 g fat	**11 g sugar** (2.75 tsp)

Sneaky Sugar

It's surprising how many prepared products in your supermarket might contain sugar. Here are just a few:

- baked beans
- barbecue sauce
- bread
- breakfast cereal
- cookies
- crackers
- dried fruit
- frozen dinners
- fruit juice
- fruit spreads
- fruit yogurt
- granola and other multigrain cereals
- granola bars
- iced tea
- instant oatmeal
- ketchup
- muffins and muffin mixes
- pasta sauce
- peanut butter
- potato chips
- protein drinks
- some reduced-fat products (see "The Low-Fat Trap")
- salad dressings
- sports drinks

What's in a Name?

For the best dental health, buy products with the least amount of sugar (it will be included toward the end of the ingredient list). When checking labels, you might not always see the word "sugar," but these are all a form of it:

- **barley malt**
- **cane juice**
- **corn syrup**
- **dextrose**
- **fructose**
- **glucose**
- **sucrose**
- **honey**
- **maltodextrin**
- **maple syrup**
- **molasses**