Published on *Happily Whole* (https://www.livinghappilywhole.com)

The Not So Sweet Side of Sugar

January 21, 2014, written by katie



I'm no sweet extremist! I love a sweet treat from time to time...see here for a current fav [1]! Oh, even the thought of Talenti Gelato [2] or a home baked soft, warm cookie makes my mouth water. Or wait... both together sounds simply decadent, doesn't it?

But when my six year old daughter, Stella, began posing questions regarding certain sweets, it got me thinking that it might be a good idea to address this sugary topic here on Happily Whole. It started when she wondered why I let her have our organic suckers but not the blow pops they hand out to the kids after the children's sermon at church. My knee-jerk reaction (which I did not verbalize), 'that's a LOT of artificially colored sugar on a stick for 8:30am.'

Then, after some mental censoring, I explained how I prefer the organic suckers because they lack unhealthy dyes (fake ingredients that make them colorful), contain color from real foods and they use natural sweeteners instead of processed white sugar. So, organic suckers are still a treat but not so unhealthy.

That response satisfied Stella, a child whose mind incessantly generates questions and isn't satisfied until every stone is overturned, temporarily.

The very next day while enjoying a snack including raw almonds and dried, unsulfured apricots, I gave her a few more almonds but no more dried apricots. And so the 'whys?' began. I explained that dried fruits are a bit high in sugar and even though it's from a fruit, it's mostly better to eat the whole fruit since it includes the water. Done, right?

NOPE.

Stella, in her inquiring ways, formed her next curiosity. 'I thought you said that natural sugars are better for you when you gave me the organic suckers. Why can't I have more natural apricot sugar?' OH BOY!

And so we embarked on a conversation about **moderation in all things.**

However, my Friends, assuming that your curiosities go beyond those of my 6 year old, I want to talk a little bit more about why sugar, ANY kind, is not always so sweet.

Let's start with what I was getting at with Stella. Natural and processed/refined sugars exist. When we eat sweet treats I try to primarily choose natural ones simply because of my stance on products that have been processed with chemicals and other non-nutritive substances.

When I bake I use things like pure maple syrup, raw honey, coconut sugar and even unrefined organic cane sugar. But, even those natural sources of sweet cause blood sugar to rise (some more dramatically than others) and, some research shows that it triggers a 'brain taste' for more.

What I mean by a 'brain taste' is a CRAVING. Our brains are hijacked by sweets very easily especially when we are not in the practice of eating intuitively. Some of us are more susceptible then others and I have found that Stella and I are both a bit on the 'sugar addict' side.

When we eat sugars, either natural or refined, our bodies break the sweet molecules down into fructose and glucose. **The real problem lies in the fructose effect on the body.** Our bodies are amazing in so many ways and they are hard wired to send cues of satisfaction that tell us when we have had enough food. You got it! There are hormones designed specifically to let our brains know when to start and stop eating….except in the case of fructose. So, it's super easy to keep eating sweets beyond the feeling of *'comfortably satisfied'.* (Side note: Comfortably satisfied is a content feeling from eating the appropriate amount of food for your body at any moment in time…it's good to get to know 'comfortably satisfied'.)

Interestingly, this has only become a problem in the last 150 years or so. Historically, sugar was not such a health threat. It was highly useful for necessary energy AND it was rare since there were not

so many manmade versions. Plus, our ancestors moved much more than we do culturally today, using natural sugars as fuel rather than storing it. They also did not have access to it in so many baked, boxed and processed foods.

Instead, the foods fructose was consumed in, like berries and other fruits, also provided valuable nutrients. And, therefore, enter the PROBLEM for us today: we evolved as a people without a hormonal 'off switch' for fructose. Since that is perpetuated by our hijacked brains telling us we want more and more, it's easy to see the not so sweet side of sugar (and we haven't even gotten into the health risks it poses when over-consumed)!

Where does that leave us? Well, I am not giving up my sweet treats forevermore so I have some personal strategies:

1. I stay away from low fat or fat free milk and other products. Manufacturers replace what they have taken out with simple sugars. So I skip those for the full fat, more flavorful options. *That's also in compliance with my 'real food' philosophy [3]', I write more about HERE [3].*
2. I limit dried fruit snacks and granola bars to an occasional treat.
3. We drink very little to no fruit juice. A glass contains about 12 to 22 grams of sugar. That's dessert in a glass. When we do get it, it's all natural and a special treat.
4. I read the labels of sauces, especially tomato sauces. Try it. You will find that they often have the same amount of sugar as chocolate sauce.
5. I make my own bakery goods. Rarely do I buy cookies, muffins or bakery breads. When I bake my own I omit some of the sweetness and almost always substitute the sugar for a more natural nutritious source so at least we consume more nutrients. Example HERE [4]and HERE [5].
6. I stay away from sugar free foods. YUCK. They often use highly processed, artificial sweeteners or agave which is about 70% fructose. So, instead, we eat small portions of the real thing!

I will be the first to admit that if I am paying a babysitter to enjoy a dinner out, I am having dessert! So, instead of saying sayonara to all sweets, indulge wisely and savor each sweet for what it is: a real treat.

I hope this helps you decipher the sweet mystery hidden on the grocery store shelves. Once again, this brings us back to the basics of eating real food! In another year or two I will share this full lesson with Stella. For now, I will stick with teaching her **moderation in all things**!

A Sweet Goodbye for today,

Katie

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[3] https://www.livinghappilywhole.com/content/my-real-food-revelation

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