

Merry or scary? Managing sugar without spoiling the holidays

Happy holidays! December is upon us, and with it come the familiar, tempting smells of cinnamon, hot chocolate, and fresh cookies. Holiday lunches and office parties are full of tasty foods, abundant sweets, and celebratory cocktails. Physicians' offices brim with festive tokens of appreciation: boxed chocolates, gift baskets, and holiday baking. The air, both figuratively and literally, seems sweeter in December.

But as physicians, we know that sugar in our society has become more than an occasional indulgence. A 2023 study in the *British Medical Journal* found significant harmful associations between excess dietary sugar consumption and 18 endocrine/metabolic outcomes, 10 cardiovascular outcomes, 7 cancer outcomes, and 10 other negative outcomes spanning neuropsychiatric, dental, hepatic, osteal, and allergic conditions.¹ Each 250 mL/day increment of sugar-sweetened beverage consumption was associated with a 17% higher risk of coronary heart disease and a 4% higher risk of all-cause mortality.¹

Sugar-sweetened beverages are the largest source of added sugars worldwide,¹ and childhood obesity has been independently associated with their consumption.² These drinks have become so prevalent in our daily lives that avoiding them is nearly impossible—especially during the holidays.

Sugars also come in many different forms and with many different names, which can make it confusing to know what we are consuming and which options are more or less healthy.

Added sugars are those that are added during manufacturing or processing or at the table to change a food's composition and make it more appealing.³ Common examples include table sugar, brown sugar, corn syrup, high-fructose corn syrup, glucose,

dextrose, agave syrup, maltose, and fruit juice concentrates. High amounts of added sugars are typical in products like sports drinks, soda, candy, sweetened cereals, condiments (e.g., ketchup, salad dressing, BBQ sauce), ice cream, and baked goods. Added sugars are usually absorbed rapidly and provide calories without nutrients. Honey and maple syrup can also be added sugars, although they may also have health benefits through antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and antimicrobial properties.⁴

Rather than villainizing all forms of sugar, educating patients on achieving balance can be more sustainable and empowering.

Natural sugars are those in whole, unprocessed foods like whole fruits, vegetables, and dairy. These naturally occurring sugars, like fructose, glucose, and lactose, are delivered along with fibre, water, vitamins, and minerals, which slow absorption, promote satiety, and dampen blood-glucose spikes.⁵

Free sugars are what the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as all of the added sugars plus whatever natural sugars are present in honey, syrups, and fruit juices.³ In its most recent guideline (2015), the WHO recommends that children and adults keep free sugar consumption to less than 10% of their total energy intake, ideally under 5%.⁶

One useful tool for reducing excess sugar is understanding how to read food labels. In Canada, the nutrition facts table on packaged foods lists “sugars” (total sugars), along

with a daily percentage value: 5% or less is “a little” and 15% or more is considered “a lot,” based on 100 g of sugar per day, or 20% of a 2000-calorie diet.⁷ Notably, Canada does not require labels to distinguish between naturally occurring and added sugars. For example, a cup of plain yogurt contains lactose (a natural sugar) but no added sugars, so consumers must check the ingredient list to determine the type of sugar present. Natural sources of sugar, such as those from fruits, vegetables, and dairy, are a recommended part of a balanced diet.

If you're interested in cutting down on sugar, consider these strategies:^{3,8,9}

- Reduce gradually, even by half a teaspoon each week, to retrain your taste buds.
- 4 g of sugar = 1 teaspoon.
- Assume that sugars in foods with little or no dairy or fruit are all free sugars.
- Replace sugar-sweetened beverages with water or unsweetened tea.
- When baking, halve the sugar in recipes or substitute with unsweetened applesauce or bananas.
- Use natural alternatives like fruit, cinnamon, or coconut to sweeten foods.
- Low-calorie sweeteners can serve as a short-term bridge to reduce sugar intake.
- For those who drink alcohol, distilled spirits (e.g., vodka, gin, rum) are usually sugar-free, and “dry” wines contain less than 1 to 2 g of sugar per 5 oz serving.¹⁰ Cocktails with juice, cola mixers, eggnog, and creamy liqueurs have 5 to 10 times that amount of sugar. Most regular beers (e.g., lager, ale, pilsner) and “light” beers have very little sugar (0 to 2 g per serving), while darker beers have comparatively more sugar.¹¹ In general, try drinking water between alcoholic drinks to stay hydrated and reduce overall sugar intake.

Continued on page 342

Midweek munch and muse

Being a member of the *BCMJ* Editorial Board for the last 17+ years has taught me a few things about communication. I believe the main aim of the journal is to communicate knowledge, thoughts, and ideas that are relevant to BC physicians. In doing so, the journal builds connections between us. Good communication is the cornerstone of strong and healthy relationships.

My partner is an aunty to two lovely nieces. By extension, they call me “Uncley.” Their parents have started a wonderful tradition in their family called the midweek munch and muse. The goal of this tradition is to strengthen the bonds within the family. It also enhances their children’s comfort with talking to adults. Every Wednesday, the six of us (mom, dad, daughters, aunty, and uncley) get together after dinner and spend an hour or more talking. In rotating fashion, one member of the group will put together a selection of questions and some refreshment for the evening. Going in turn, we each draw a question that we have to answer for the group, while everyone is munching on their gourmet treat, sourced by the week’s leader. Even the kids, ages 8 and 11, have their turn creating the questions and curating the treats. These are some of the questions from recent weeks:

- When you think about the last few months, what are you most grateful for?
- What has been most important or meaningful to you lately?
- What’s one thing you wish people asked you about more often?
- If you could spend more time on one thing in your life, what would it be?
- When you think about the future, what are you most hopeful for?
- What’s been bringing you joy lately?
- What’s something you are excited about right now?
- Is there anything in your life that you would like to change or improve this year?
- What’s the silliest thing you did this week that made you laugh?
- If you could invent a new holiday, what would it be called, and how would we celebrate?
- If you could travel anywhere in the world (or outer space!), where would you go?
- If you could eat only one food for a whole week, what would you pick?
- What’s something you’re really proud of from this week?
- If you could talk to animals, what’s the first question you’d ask?
- What’s your favorite thing to do when you feel bored?
- If you could design your own playground, what would it look like?
- What’s one thing you want to try or learn with our family this month?

The questions give multiple opportunities for everyone around the table to communicate with each other. It’s one of the highlights of our week and is a fun way to engage with each other.

As my tenure on the Editorial Board draws to a close, I am musing about the great experience it has been. I was invited on to the Editorial Board by D1, when he became the editor (see *BCMJ* 2022;64:283). Seventeen and a half years later (it went by in a flash), it is time for me to step aside for another colleague to take my place. It has been a privilege to work with such gifted and genuinely nice people during this time. This is D2 signing off. ■

—David B. Chapman, MBChB

Your ticket to a stress-free journey is travel insurance with belairdirect.



Enjoy an entire year of unlimited travel insurance, often for less than the cost of single trip coverage¹ through our insurance partner, belairdirect.

Visit belairdirect.com/travel-groups or call **1 833 583.3301** for a quote

belairdirect.
travel insurance

© 2025, Belair Insurance Company Inc. All rights reserved. Certain conditions, limitations and exclusions apply. Offers may change without notice. Visit belairdirect.com for more details. ¹Based on a comparison of 40-day Base Plan against single trip plans with similar benefits.

Continued from page 340

Sugar is an inseparable part of celebration, but it doesn't need to overshadow our health. As physicians, we can help families keep festive traditions joyful while offering practical, evidence-based guidance. Rather than villainizing all forms of sugar, educating patients on achieving balance can be more sustainable and empowering. Small, mindful changes around added sugar can protect well-being and model healthy habits for children, ensuring that holiday treats remain merry, not scary. ■

—Caitlin Dunne, MD, FRCSC

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Ms Dani Renouf, RD, at St. Paul's Hospital for her assistance in reviewing and editing and Ms Brooke Ballantyne Scott, medical librarian, Fraser Health, for her assistance with a literature search.

References

1. Huang Y, Chen Z, Chen B, et al. Dietary sugar consumption and health: Umbrella review. *BMJ* 2023;381:e071609. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2022-071609>.
2. Ludwig DS, Peterson KE, Gortmaker SL. Relation between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: A prospective, observational analysis. *Lancet* 2001;357(9255):505-508. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(00\)04041-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(00)04041-1).
3. Beck L. Need a reason to cut back on sugar? Here are 45. *Globe and Mail*. Updated 25 April 2023. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/article-reduce-sugar-intake-studies/.
4. Lubeck B. Maple syrup vs. honey: Which sweetener is better for nutrition, healing, and blood sugar? *Verywell Health*. 29 September 2025. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.verywellhealth.com/maple-syrup-vs-honey-11820103.
5. American Heart Association. Sugar 101. Last reviewed 23 September 2024. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/sugar/sugar-101.
6. World Health Organization. Guideline: Sugars intake for adults and children. 4 March 2015. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241549028.
7. Government of Canada. Nutrition labelling: Nutrition facts table. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/food-nutrition/nutrition-labelling/nutrition-facts-tables.html.
8. Prager C, Cassetty S. How to start cutting back on sugar in just 7 days, according to a dietitian. *Prevention*. Updated 5 January 2022. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.prevention.com/food-nutrition/healthy-eating/a35109234/how-to-cut-back-on-sugar/.
9. American Heart Association. Tips for cutting down on sugar. Last reviewed 31 July 2024. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/sugar/tips-for-cutting-down-on-sugar.
10. Williams L. Cutting back on sugar? Here's what wine drinkers need to know. *Wine Spectator*. 21 September 2023. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.winespectator.com/articles/what-healthy-wine-drinkers-need-to-know-about-sugar.
11. Lang A. How much sugar is in beer? *Healthline*. 4 March 2020. Accessed 3 November 2025. www.healthline.com/nutrition/how-much-sugar-in-beer.

GROW YOUR PRACTICE WITH BOTOX

Therapeutic & Aesthetic Injectables Training



Train to the highest Standard of Practice in Canada for facial aesthetics



The most clinically based training Inject 8+ patients at the hands-on



Anatomy-based training 25 hrs in Level 1 online



SAVE \$500 LEVEL 1



START TODAY WITH THE ONLINE LEVEL 1 ANATOMY COURSE (25 CE)



PACIFIC TRAINING INSTITUTE
for FACIAL AESTHETICS & THERAPEUTICS

Level 2 clinical hands-on training available in the following cities:
Vancouver • Calgary • Saskatoon • Montreal • Toronto • Halifax • St. John's

USE "SAVENOW" PROMO CODE. EXP DEC 31, 2025

PTIFA.com | 1-855-681-0066