

Children, Moods and Sugar

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Having a "sweet tooth" is considered a problem for many reasons. Sugars have been linked with health risks as varied as weight gain, diabetes and bizarre behavior.

Sugars are also recognized as one of the building blocks of life. There are both simple or complex sugars. All complex sugars are broken down in the body into simple sugars, and used for a number of different metabolic and nutritional tasks. There is no doubt about it, sugars are an important part of people's diets. It's just a question of how much, what kind and whether there are health risks from eating it.



The most common sugars are glucose, sucrose, lactose, fructose and maltose. These can be found in foods as diverse as vegetables, fruits, grains, refined foods, milk and their products. We also tend to eat concentrated sugar in white or brown sugar, honey, molasses, and corn, maple or other syrups.

Linked to Hyperactivity?

In recent years, sugar has been linked with hyperactivity in children. Hyperactivity is seen as restlessness, irritability, aggressiveness, poor sleeping and short attention spans. Some studies do seem to suggest this, while others refute the claim. Researchers for the US FDA found that sugars were important for brain activity and could even calm children.



This is not to say that parents should give their child a candy bar to calm down. But a natural sugar source such as a sun-ripened piece of fruit, or wholesome grain product could be just what they need to lose their 'edgy' feeling and relax.

Often, aggressive or "hyper" behavior is a sign of low blood sugar. Carbohydrates, including sugars are our bodies' main source of energy. Naturally occurring sugars are vital for our health. What is not vital is the consumption of highly processed foods that contain large amounts of added sugars and other additives.

When only refined processed sugars are eaten, the blood glucose tends to fall more quickly after a meal. As a result, our adrenaline kicks in to compensate. People who are sensitive to lowered blood sugar may show a tendency towards shakiness, and nervous, erratic behavior. They are irritable until the crisis is met. In other words, until they restore their sugar supply.

If natural sources of sugar are eaten, this crisis is less likely to happen. The blood glucose stays more stable until the next meal. Children are more susceptible to falling blood sugars than adults are. Thus they need high quality, natural foods in their diets even more.

Sugar as a Comforter

It is quite common for food to be seen as a way to make us feel better. For children and adults alike, the more coping skills we have to deal with distress and moody feelings, the less likely that food will be used as a source of comfort. Carbohydrates are especially soothing, since they help the brain to receive tryptophan and convert it to serotonin, a brain chemical that makes us feel

sleepy and comforted.

The more rapidly the sugar in food is absorbed, the faster it raises the serotonin which improves the mood. Glucose and sucrose, common in candies and refined foods are the most rapidly absorbed sugars, while fructose is the slowest. Fructose, abundant in ripe fruit is therefore the best choice for long-lasting comfort and calming.

Nutritious conscious child experts suggest that parents help their children learn to self-quiet themselves by giving them ample soothing and comfort in loving ways. To keep their sugar levels in balance, give plenty of fresh fruit, whole grain baked (versus fried) products, and keep the diet as natural and unrefined as possible. Not only for their moods, but their general growth and development as well. Sugar is important, but keep it as simple and natural as possible. Your child will thank you for it!



Resources:

The Relationship between Sugar and Children's Behavior

at Dr. Greene's Housecalls, gives some brief but sound advice on feeding your child sugar, at:
<http://www.drgreene.com/960303a.asp>

Sugar n' Spice and Everything Nice

by Dr. Nancy Appleton offers guidelines for parents to watch the amount of refined sugars and other processed foods in their children's diets.

http://www.healthychild.com/database/sugar_n_spice_and_everything_nice.htm