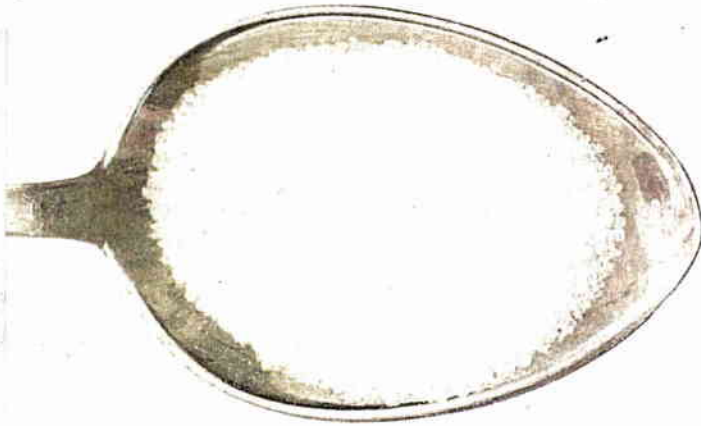


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Underneath
the sugar and
syrup lie myriad
health risks

STORY:
NAPAMON ROONGWITOO

L1, L6

Bitter truths about



sweet deals



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One of the most common breakfast choices for Thai people is deep-fried dough (*pa tong ko*) and sweetened condensed milk, to go with a cup of coffee.

Sounds ordinary, almost predictable. But that simple meal comes with more sugar than you're recommended to consume in a day.

A packet of ready-mix coffee contains 8g of sugar, while a 454ml cup of whole milk latte gives you about 20g of sugar. A teaspoon of condensed milk contains 3-4g of sugar, and to fully enjoy the fried dough, we need about 10 teaspoons, or up to 40g, of sugar in our bloodstream.

That's about 50-60g of sugar in a meal. The recommended daily intake, however, is not more than 25g of sugar for women and no more than 37.5g for men.

Somsri Tachavarakul, dietician at Bumrungrad Hospital, said that people nowadays are more hooked on sweetness than ever, and statistics have shown that Thai people have developed quite a sweet tooth over the years, and the addiction has led to myriad health problems, from obesity and hypertension to heart disease.

"Recently, the Ministry of Health revealed that Thai people consume almost 30kg of sugar each year, and that's three times higher than the recommended amount," the dietician said.

Another big issue in Thailand is the misconception surrounding the use of sweeteners. There are more than 10 kinds of sweeteners available at supermarkets today, from white sugar, brown sugar, caramel sugar, low-calorie sugar, palm sugar, syrup and honey to artificial sweeteners like aspartame and sucralose. Some people are under the misunderstanding that certain sweeteners are better and therefore can be consumed in larger amounts.

Under the different names and sources, the nutritional and health-related differences might not be that significant, according to Somsri. "Speaking of natural sweeteners, the calories in them are not that different, and nor is the nutritional value," she said. They are basically empty calories.

While some sweeteners, such as honey, are said to contain some nutrients, the amount is so small that they should not be counted as part of your daily nutritional intake.

On the other hand, artificial sweeteners are not "healthier" substitutes for sugar. Somsri said that while studies still show mixed results regarding the danger of artificial sweeteners, most of the tests were conducted on mice, not human beings.

"Some believe it's perfectly fine, while some say they might have certain negative effects on the body. I would not advise pregnant women or children to choose artificial sweeteners, because the risk is not zero."

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Bitter truths about sweet deals

Diet drinks contain artificial sweeteners, and since we are led to believe they are "guilt-free" treats, we might be tempted to drink a little too much of them, which can lead to other health problems. With or without sugar, carbonated soft drinks might cause bone density loss or even osteoporosis.

"The explanation is that the phosphate content of soft drinks is very high. When phosphate levels are high and calcium levels are low, the calcium in our body is pulled out of the bones, and insufficient

calcium can cause your bones to be weaker," Somsri said. She also warned that diet drinks frequently can make a person more dependent on sweetness and crave treats more often.

Functional drinks and beauty drinks, even ones that boast weight-loss benefits, also contain sugar. They might be promoted as healthy drinks, but the sugar in them might be as high as in other drinks'. Some are fruit-based, which means they have natural fructose, while some have added sugar. "Diet coffees,

beauty drinks or other functional drinks all contain sugar of a sort, whether from fruit or from added sweetener. Always check the label carefully before you drink them, because you might end up getting more sugar than your body needs," the dietician said.

Sugar is also hidden in many drinks and food. Of course, we know that cakes and cookies have sugar, but sometimes we forget to think about the naturally occurring sweetness in fruits and milk. Somsri said that fruit juices should be consumed carefully. "Some brands make their juices from concentrate, some from syrup, and some from real fruit. Even brands that claim their juices are 100% natural should be consumed with caution. When we eat two apples, they don't even taste the same, so how can hundreds of cartons of apple juice from one company taste the same? It just doesn't sound natural."

The bottom line is everything should be consumed in moderation, and it makes no sense to cut sweetness from our daily life altogether. To cut down your sugar intake, Somsri has some advice from her experience with her patients.

"Just by giving up drinks that contain calories and switching to water, you could lower your sugar intake tremendously. Office people nowadays are fuelled by coffee, bubble tea or bottled green tea, and each cup or bottle gives a lot of calories. I have seen many people losing weight healthily just by sticking to water. Save sugary things for special occasions — they should not be a habit," she said.



Some beverages, even seemingly healthy fruit juices, are loaded with sugar.



Why do we crave sweetness?

For those of us who are leading a stressful life, our body is attracted to sweet things. The adrenal system is what our body calls upon in time of stress. When we were cavemen and encountered danger, our body would stimulate the adrenal system. This would dump all kinds of hormones into the bloodstream. It gives you that energy rush, and the purpose for that is to fuel your muscles quickly so you can run from the danger or fight it.

Nowadays, we're not running from anything, but we're constantly stimulating that system with stress. The minute we wake up in the morning, we're emailing, calling, texting, or driving in traffic, and those activities stimulate the adrenal system. The blood sugar runs wild with the adrenal response, so the body naturally asks for something to bring the blood sugar up. Most of the food available at that time of day would be white bread, pastries, and sugar. Those foods are the ones that bring the blood sugar up quickly, but then it comes straight down again without leaving you feeling full, so your body craves something more. It's a vicious cycle.

— *Eve Persak, a registered dietitian and wellness consultant at COMO Shambhala Estate Bali.*



Myths about sweeteners

Brown rice is a healthier option than white rice, so brown sugar is better than white sugar.

Somsri said brown sugar and white sugar are both made from sugarcane, but white sugar has been bleached to remove the molasses. The difference in terms of calories is almost non-existent, while the nutritional value of both is so small most people don't consider it.

Consuming a lot of sugar will give you diabetes.

Sugar is not the direct culprit of diabetes, Somsri explained. However, overconsumption of sugar leads to an excessive intake of calories, which in turn leads to obesity, and obesity can cause diabetes. Whether a person gains weight from sugar or other food sources does not make much difference to the risk of diabetes.

Diet drinks have no calories so an unlimited amount can be consumed.

While the calories are very low, soda drinks are not good for your health. Phosphoric acid, a major component in most fizzy drinks, may be to blame for osteoporosis. It also teaches your body to be more dependent on sweetness and crave sweet treats more often.

Sugar-free means low calories.

Sugar is not the only ingredient that gives you calories. Sugar-free does not necessarily mean carbohydrate-free, fat-free or calorie-free, and some products simply add other sweeteners to replace sugar, and those sweeteners might be just as high in calories. Check the labels carefully before eating.

Unsweetened or no-added sugar means the food has no sugar.

Some foods naturally have sugar, such as dairy products and fruits. Unsweetened yoghurt, for example, would still have some sweetness in it.

