

Sugar & the American Heart Association

By Ann Gerhardt, MD

November 2009

For the first time, the American Heart Association (AHA) has released a dietary recommendation concerning a nutrient other than fat, cholesterol and total calories. They suggest a specific upper limit of intake for added sugars, but the recommendation really targets soft drinks.

During the past 3 decades, calorie intake by Americans has increased an average of 150 to 300 calories per day without any change in exercise, contributing to bulging waistlines. Sugar-sweetened beverages and other liquid calories contributed about half of those extra calories.

Excessive sugar intake has been linked with several metabolic abnormalities, adverse health conditions, and deficiencies of essential nutrients. Greater intake of soft drinks is linked to greater energy intake, over-consumption of discretionary calories (ones that don't satisfy healthy food group requirements), higher body weight, and lower intake of essential nutrients. Regardless of energy requirements, added sugar consumption greatly exceeds discretionary calorie allowances recommended in the 2005 US Dietary Guidelines.

The AHA recommends decreasing added sugar intake. A prudent upper limit of added sugar intake is half of the discretionary calorie allowance. That's less than 100 calories (6 teaspoons) per day for most U.S. women and less than 150 calories (9 teaspoons) per day for most U.S. men.

Translating that into food might get hard, since a cookie serves up a lot of discretionary calories, only part of which is sugar. How does a non-mathematician figure what percentage comes from sugar? The calories that require no calculation, and the ones targeted by the AHA, are those in soda, since 100% of its calories are sugar.

One 12-ounce can of cola has approximately 8 teaspoons of added sugar, or roughly 130 calories. Other easy calculations: Each teaspoon of sugar has 16 calories and a tablespoon of syrup or honey has ~50 calories. You'll have to ask Starbucks how much sugar is in your Mocha Grande.