



SWEET TALK: IS SUGAR SAFE FOR CHILDREN?

Sugar has had its share of attention in the past years, from being defended to being demonised. It's not something that can be easily avoided in this modern world, for almost all foods you can find in the grocery store contains some form of it. These days, it's not surprising to find shoppers scrutinising labels in search for 'hidden sugars' as well! When it comes to children's nutrition, the question is, how much sugar can a child safely take? To answer this question and more, BabyTalk had a chat with Dr. Phang Yuk Jean, Consultant Paediatrician, Columbia Asia Hospital, Klang, and here's what we got from it.



BT: When is the ideal age for sugar to be added to a child's diet and why?

Dr Phang: Not all sugar is evil - our bodies use sugar as a source of energy. Sugar may be derived from either the breakdown of complex carbohydrates or may come from simple sugars.

Complex carbohydrates are found in natural foods such as grains, vegetables and fruit and they provide valuable nutrients as well as energy for our bodies.

However, simple sugars (which are present in sweet processed foods such as cereal bars, cookies, cakes, sweetened cereals and sweetened beverages) have little added nutritional value. Consumption of these foods and beverages can lead to excessive sugar intake which can cause problems such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

The American Heart Association recommends less than 25 grams (6 teaspoons) of sugar per day for children ages 2 to 18 years. That includes no more than 8 ounces of sugar-sweetened drinks per week.

Children younger than 2 years should have no sugar at all. This is because their calorie needs are lower, and taking sugar-laden foods and beverages would fill them up and leave less room for nutrient-dense foods.

BT: Does the intake of sugar and sugary food has anything to do with the steady rise in communicable

illnesses such as diabetes, obesity and inflammation among our youngest age group today?

Dr Phang: The intake of excessive sugary foods and especially beverages contribute to the increased energy intake from 'empty calories', and can lead to unhealthy weight gain, especially when paired with a sedentary lifestyle. Often children (and even adults) underestimate how much sugar goes into sweetened beverages or foods. For example, how many of us are aware that a can of Cola contains 6 teaspoons of sugar, a bottle of popular berry drink has 13 teaspoons of sugar, or some cans of commercial iced tea may contain 16 teaspoons of sugar? Unless they are weight-watchers themselves or are well-read on the subject, most parents may be completely unaware of this.

Obesity is on the rise, and up to 30% of Malaysian children are currently affected. Overweight and obese children are at higher risk of developing serious health problems including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, liver problems, gallstones, sleep disorders, and even depression.

Childhood obesity also increases the risk of noncommunicable diseases, premature death and disability in adulthood. Obese children are likely to grow up to become obese adults (there is a 50% risk of an obese 6 year old to become an obese adult, and between

70-80% risk of an obese teenager to become an obese adult). Worse still, even if an overweight child loses this weight, he/she will still have a higher risk of developing coronary heart disease (twofold risk).

BT: Can sugar be addictive to a young child?

Dr Phang: Taste preferences begins early in life, and so children who are exposed to sweet foods or beverages (even something considered as 'healthy' eg fruit juice) at a young age often grow up to have a sweet tooth and develop a taste for these foods for the rest of their lives. Thus, limiting added sugars may help children develop a lifelong preference for healthier foods.

BT: What is your advice for parents who wish to raise their children on a diet which restricts sugar to a minimum?

Dr Phang: Read food labels carefully. Offer healthy choices at every meal (eg plenty of whole foods, more fruits and vegetables) and limit processed foods, and especially, sugary drinks. Sweet treats can be given as a treat, in reasonable portions on special occasions.

