

Just a Spoonful

Sugar Excesses Targeted, But Many Say a Little is OK

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What's that smell? Burning sugar, perhaps?

There's the British study released earlier this month that suggests kids who eat candy every day may be prone to a life of crime later on.

And in a recent letter sent to newspapers in Illinois, pediatric department heads at the state's teaching hospitals took aim at sugar-sweetened drinks, calling for a hefty new tax on the dietary bad-guy umbrella — which covers soft drinks, energy drinks, sports beverages, fruit juice blends and sweetened tea-based preparations.

Naperville schools have addressed the sugar-saturation issue already. In 2006, District 203 implemented a new policy limiting the sweet treats at class parties to one for each celebrant, mostly to shift the focus from sugary food to other forms of fun.

Even downtown businesswoman and sweets diva Neda Darwish, whose Sugar Monkey Cupcakes shop is named for her three busy young sons, freely acknowledges that it's easy to have too much of a good thing. She said she brings cupcakes home just once a week, and each boy is allowed to eat just one of them.

"I think everything is good, in moderation. For somebody to cut sugar out of their diet is unrealistic. But as far as kids go, absolutely," said Darwish, who was a nurse in an earlier professional life. "You have to limit how much sugar they eat. It's just not healthy for them ... It shouldn't be something that they have for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Sensible-diet authority **Christine Palumbo**, a registered dietitian who lives and practices in Naperville, isn't a purist when it comes to sugar, either. It's all about moderation.

"An occasional indulgence with a dish of ice cream or a little bit of candy is fine, for both children and adults," said **Palumbo**, who doesn't mind admitting she's fond of a teaspoon of sugar stirred into a freshly brewed cup of java.

While she doesn't argue with the proposition that we would all do well to take in less sugar-enhanced fluid — "We were designed to drink water to quench our thirst," she noted — **Palumbo** sees other targets as equally valid, including restaurants' massive portion sizes, the rise in indiscriminate snacking and the increase in processed foods. "Sugar is just a small portion of the excessive number of calories that many of us are taking in," she said.

Also of substantial concern, **Palumbo** said, is our failure to burn off that caloric surplus. "As a society, we have engineered physical activity out of our days. Just about every day, there is something new that saves us the effort to get up off our duffs."

There are other reasons why the recent developments in the ongoing anti-sugar crusade need not necessarily send people hunting for receipts and returning those bags of fun-size bars they so cleverly picked up so as to be ready for the front-door beggars at month's end. Researchers' conclusions are carefully couched, and activists' targets are pretty precise.

Dr. David Deutsch of the University of Illinois' Women and Children's Health Center in Rockford, one of the pop-tax letter's signers, said children are drinking a lot more soft drinks and other sugar-heavy beverages than they did in days past, now averaging 172 calories daily from sweetened liquids. It's making children heavier at a time when money for pediatric prevention programs is tight — and record numbers of overweight youth suggest kids are wearing jeans that are even tighter.

"Basically what we're trying to do is two things," Deutsch said. "One is to try to get increased funding for children's health. If you look at the numbers, the funding we have for kids especially is low. "Two is to try to decrease preventable illnesses, because those go on to affect health care costs as well. Obesity is one of the main things that has caused those costs to go up in recent years." Sugary sodas specifically are a major culprit in the widespread weight gain, he added. "If you increase the cost, they won't drink as much," Deutsch said.

In their letter, the doctors cited research indicating calorie intake could be reduced significantly by a 20 percent hike in the cost of soft drinks. They also estimated that adding one penny per ounce — a new 12-cent tax on a regular can of pop — would generate \$14 billion in new revenue per year.

It isn't all about money, of course. Raising healthy, law-abiding kids is also another sensible objective. While the researchers at Cardiff University in Wales noted that about 69 percent of their study subjects who reported having committed violent acts also said they ate candy daily at age 10 (just 42 percent of those who did not have a violent criminal past had it that often as kids), they stopped short of recommending hanging photographs of confections on the wall at local post offices, beneath the word "Wanted."

Lead researcher Simon Moore said the crime figures could reflect offenders whose problems with impulse control trace back to the days when they were given candy whenever they wanted it, and perhaps weren't taught to wait for gratification of their every wish. "It's not that the sweets themselves are bad," Moore told the Associated Press. "It's more about interpreting how kids make decisions."

Still, even after Moore and his colleagues took into account such variables as differences in parenting skills and varying social and economic backgrounds, they saw a significant link between consumption of sweets in childhood and commission of crime in adulthood. Moore isn't ready to recommend parents stop giving their children candies and chocolates, though. "This is an incredibly complex area," he said. "It's not fair to blame it on the candy.

Or the pop, for that matter. Everyone appears able to agree that moderation is key. "Sugar is evil and good, I guess," Darwish said.