

FAQs: Sugars

BNF answers some common questions on sugars.

I've heard that we should be cutting down on 'free sugars'. What does this mean?

We may think of sugar as being one thing – table sugar – but did you know there are different types of sugar? We are advised to reduce 'free sugars' in our diet. Free sugars are all sugars added to foods and drinks in any form whether added by you in homemade dishes or by food manufacturers. Free sugars are present in foods such as cakes, biscuits, sweets, sweet spreads and sauces, as well as sugars-sweetened soft drinks. Such foods can be high in calories and are not needed in the diet and, if included, should be consumed less often and in small amounts. Free sugars also include sugars that are naturally present in all syrups (e.g. agave syrup), unsweetened fruit and vegetable juices and smoothies, purees and pastes where the structure has been broken down. Sugar found naturally in milk and dairy foods (i.e. the lactose in yogurt, cheese and milk) and fruit and vegetables (fresh, canned, frozen, dried with no added sugars) does not count as free sugars. These foods form an important part of a healthy, balanced diet. You can find a detailed definition of free sugars on our website.



Per banana
(100 g)

81 kcal

18 g sugars
that do not
count as free
sugars.



Per chocolate
bar (45 g)

240 kcal

25 g free
sugars.

Why do the sugars in fruit and vegetable juices and smoothies count as free sugars whereas the sugars present within fruit and vegetables in other forms do not?

The UK government's definitions of sugars have made a distinction between sugars in fruit and vegetable juices, smoothies, pastes and purées (where sugars are released from the cell structure during the production of these) and those in the whole fruit and veg (that remain inside the cells). It has been suggested that sugars such as those in juices and smoothies can be consumed more easily in much greater quantities than sugars present within structures that have not been broken down; in other words we can drink a glass of juice or smoothie much quicker than the time it would take us to eat the number of whole fruits and vegetables it took to make it, and this could lead to overconsumption of calories and sugars. Juices and whole fruit and vegetables also differ in the amount of fibre they contain - most of the fibre is lost when the fruit or vegetable is juiced. However, fruit and vegetable juices and smoothies do contain useful micronutrients like vitamin C and 150ml (the maximum daily recommended amount) counts as one of your 5 A DAY.



Why all the recent fuss about reducing free sugars?

It has been well established that higher amounts and frequency of sugar consumption are associated with increased risk of dental decay and research suggests that having more sugar in your diet tends to mean you will consume more calories overall. Some evidence from trials in children and adolescents shows that sugars sweetened beverages are linked to weight gain and in addition some observational evidence suggests consuming high amounts of sugars-sweetened drinks may increase risk of type 2 diabetes.



How can I tell how much free sugar is in the food I buy?

Nutrition labels must provide information about total sugars (which is the sum of both the free sugars and sugars that do not count as free sugars within the product) per 100g. Some products will also have this information listed per portion. As we are only given a total sugar value, working out the free sugars content of certain foods can be difficult.

For example

- fruit or flavoured yogurt, contains naturally occurring lactose but also may contain free sugars such as sugar, honey or fruit concentrates and purees added as a sweetener
- breakfast cereals may contain both dried fruits which do not count as free sugars, and free sugars (such as sugar, molasses or syrups).



However, the ingredients list is a good place to start as sugars added to a product must be included in it. Free sugars may appear in the ingredients list as 'sugar' but other words and terms to look for include honey, brown sugar, maple syrup, molasses/treacle, nectars, agave syrup, coconut sugar, dextrose, fructose, sucrose, glucose, maltose, (high-fructose) corn syrup, fruit juice concentrate, isoglucose and crystalline sucrose. Ingredients are listed in descending order of weight, so if a type of sugar appears near the beginning of the ingredients list, the product is likely to have more free sugars than one in which added sugars are at the end.

Which foods contribute the most to free sugar intake in the UK?

The main sources of free sugars in the UK diet are sugars-sweetened beverages (sugary fizzy drinks, energy drinks and cordials) and fruit juice, cakes, biscuits, desserts, sweet spreads and confectionery. Reducing our intake of these foods may help us reduce our free sugars intake.



Is there a lot of 'hidden sugar' in the foods we buy?

In some cases, sugars may be added to savoury foods like sauces, soups, condiments and ready meals for taste, such as in a tomato-based sauce to counter the acidity of the tomatoes. Sugar also features as an ingredient in some homemade sauces recipes for the same reason. Although savoury foods do not appear to be making a significant contribution to our free sugars intake, which mainly comes from sweet foods and drinks, foods such as ready meals and cooking and table sauces are included in the government's calorie reduction programme tasking the food industry to reduce calories in many savoury food categories. This is resulting in levels of sugars added to such foods being reduced. As to whether sugars are being 'hidden', it is compulsory (by law) for food companies to display the ingredients and the nutritional content of all foods and drinks, therefore the phrase 'hidden sugar' used in relation to labelled products is incorrect.

How can I reduce free sugars in my diet?

Following healthy dietary patterns can help to reduce our free sugars intake. Such patterns typically include fibre-rich, starchy carbohydrates (like wholegrains and potatoes with skins), with plenty of fruit and vegetables, and some protein-containing foods, such as beans, pulses, fish, eggs and lean meat, and lower fat, lower sugar dairy products. At the same time, many of us need to reduce our consumption of foods that contain lots of free sugars, including sugar itself, confectionery, cakes, pastries and biscuits. We can also limit our intake of sugars sweetened beverages by replacing some with water and lower-fat milks. If you would like a sweet taste, opt for no added sugar fruit squash and juices or 'no added sugars' drinks. And don't forget alcoholic drinks, on average, currently contribute around 10% of adults' free sugar intakes.

