

SUGAR...

NOT SO SWEET

YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD AVOID ALCOHOL, SOFT CHEESE AND SUSHI IN PREGNANCY, BUT NOW THERE'S A NEW EATING NO-NO EMERGING - SUGAR. HELEN FOSTER FINDS OUT WHY THE EXPERTS ARE WORRIED

In the last few years, sugar has become food enemy number one, with experts suggesting we cut our intake from the average 59g a day we currently consume to just 25g (six teaspoons) of added sugar a day. The main reason is sugar's link to weight gain – but emerging research is also linking high-sugar diets to higher risks of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. This has led to scientists focusing more and more on sugar's impact on the body – and recently they've thrown up particular issues for mums-to-be.

Before exploring this, though, there's one very important thing to be clarified. When we say sugar we mean the white stuff you add to tea and coffee, the refined sugar and syrups (including the supposedly healthy ones such as agave or molasses) found in sweet foods such as cakes, biscuits, chocolate and fizzy drinks, and also the unexpected added sugars that sneak into savoury foods – for instance pasta sauces, soups and salad dressings. What we don't mean is fruit – yes, fruit does contain sugars but when you eat a whole apple or banana the sugar is bound up within fibre which slows down how long it takes you to digest the sugar and reduces negative effects. So limit added sugars, think twice about fruit juice (which doesn't have that fibre) – but don't ban fruit!

With that out of the way, let's now talk about what science is discovering about sugar and pregnancy – and it starts as soon as you start planning.

SUGAR MAY AFFECT FERTILITY

It's not an issue for everyone; nor is it the only thing to consider. But if you're having trouble conceiving, your intake of sugar might be something to think about. 'If you eat a lot of sugar it can cause spikes in insulin which harm the cells of the body – including the egg and the sperm,' says fertility guru Zita West. The women most likely to benefit from quitting sugar during conception are women with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), which has already been linked to impaired reactions to insulin in the body. Insulin levels also rise when you digest carbohydrates, and in one study IVF patients who switched to low-carb, high-protein diets were four times more likely to conceive than those eating more carbs.

SUGAR DURING PREGNANCY

The effects of sugar in pregnancy itself recently hit the headlines when some researchers at Queen Mary University of London linked a high sugar intake in pregnant women with a higher rate of allergic asthma (that's asthma which is triggered by allergens, such as dust mites, cats and grass) in their kids.

The evidence wasn't conclusive, but it's not the first time that a mum-to-be's sugar intake has been linked to asthma in her offspring; it's believed that these high levels of sugar might increase inflammation in developing lung tissue, which predisposes children to allergies and asthma in later life.

On top of this, past studies have linked a high intake of sugar, and the subsequent rise in blood sugar this causes, to larger babies.

In a study by University College Dublin, women with higher blood sugar measurements in their 28th week of

pregnancy were found to be 3.5 times more likely to give birth to babies weighing over 9lb 15oz (4.5kg) than those with lower levels – and the larger your baby, the greater the risk that you will need a caesarean.

'High sugar consumption during pregnancy can also increase the risk of gestational diabetes,' says nutritional therapist Laura Southern, who advises mums-to-be at London Gynaecology.

'When we digest food, sugar enters the bloodstream. In response to this the body produces insulin to move the sugar from the blood into the cells to be used for energy. During pregnancy, however, hormones in some women can affect this ability to produce insulin, leading to higher levels of sugar in the blood – aka gestational diabetes.'

While the problem doesn't affect the pregnancy and will normally disappear after birth, gestational diabetes can increase the risk of you, or your baby, developing type 2 diabetes in later life.

SUGAR AND BREASTFEEDING

The main sugar in breast milk is usually lactose, but a new study from the US has found fructose too, and linked it to excess weight gain in babies.

They're not sure where the fructose comes from, but suspect syrups high in fructose (that are added to soft drinks and processed foods) may play a role, and have named the problem 'secondhand sugar exposure'. Babies shouldn't be exposed to this highly processed form of fructose and even tiny amounts in milk, the equivalent in weight to a grain of rice, were associated with negative effects, impacting on how fat cells form and raising the risk of obesity in adulthood.

HOW TO CUT BACK

So now you know *why* you might want to limit sugar in pregnancy, but the *how* isn't always easy. These tips may help.

KNOW HOW TO SPOT IT It's hard to avoid sugar if you don't know what it's called on food labels. Watch for words ending in 'ose' – such as fructose, maltose or sucrose; also molasses, hydrolysed starch, corn syrup and agave (while this sweetener is touted as a healthy sugar alternative, it actually contains a high percentage of fructose, the type of sugar experts are most concerned about).



Step away from the doughnuts mama – your baby will thank you for it

WATCH THE CARBS According to nutritionist Claudia le Feuvre from Happy In Body, too many carbs and not enough fat and protein at breakfast or lunch is a sure-fire way to trigger sugar cravings mid-morning or mid-afternoon. 'Make sure your meals contain a little wholegrain carbohydrate such as Granary bread or oats, some protein – eggs, fish or meat – and healthy fats, maybe avocados or nuts,' she says.

DON'T COMFORT EAT WHEN STRESSED Claudia says that when you're wound up the sugar receptors on your tongue are blunted, so you'll need more and more sweetness to get the same satisfaction. But, she explains, 'Take a few deep breaths

before you eat to calm yourself and you'll feel satisfied with less sugar.'

DON'T IMAGINE 'SUGAR-FREE' MEANS 'HEALTHY' 'Unfortunately a lot of "sugar-free" food is full of artificial sweeteners that aren't necessarily any better for health,' says Laura. A study published in June this year discovered that if women with gestational diabetes had at least one artificially sweetened drink per day when pregnant, their children were

more likely to be overweight or obese by the age of seven than those born to women who just drank water.

TRY INOSITOL This is a micronutrient found in foods such cereals, fruit and nuts – or you can take it in supplement

COOK FROM SCRATCH TO STOP SUGAR SNEAKING INTO FOODS THAT DON'T NEED IT, SUCH AS SOUP OR PASTA SAUCES

form (not enough is known about its use in pregnancy and breastfeeding so it's best avoided then). Zita recommends it to women who have PCOS. 'It works in the same way as the medical drug metformin, balancing blood sugar and helping cravings,' she says. Try Inositol and Folate (£14.50, zitawest.com).

KIDS AND SUGAR

Chances are you're already well aware that children and sugar don't mix that well – it's bad for their teeth, increases risk of weight gain and impacts on energy and mood – so limiting intake is always a good idea. While there are no recommended guidelines for babies, Katharine Jenner, campaign director at Action on Sugar, says it's recommended that tots aged two to three have less than 13g (three teaspoons) a day, while those aged four to six should have no more than 19g (five teaspoons). Here's how.

CHECK LABELS Some baby foods – even the savoury ones – contain a high proportion of sugar from fruit purées, fruit juices or fruit concentrates that are added to sweeten the taste. Fortified milks can also contain added sugars. 'Also watch out for dried fruit – some are soaked in fruit juice to soften them – and fruits wrapped in

yogurt or chocolate are no better than sweets,' says Katharine. Companies are trying to tackle this – recently one university advertised for a scientist to work on how to reduce sugar in baby foods but keep the taste and textures babies like – but until the industry starts making wholesale changes we must continue to read labels, compare sugar content and pick brands that have the lowest levels.

THINK VEGETABLES

FIRST When you start weaning, offer your baby vegetable purées rather than fruit-filled ones.

'Don't worry about the funny faces they pull – it doesn't mean they

don't like it, it's just that it's a new flavour and texture,' says Paula Hallam, paediatric dietician and expert child nutritionist for Babease baby food.

BEWARE FRUIT JUICES We used to think they were a healthy option, but we now know otherwise. A recent study in the *British Medical Journal* analysed sugar in juices, smoothies and juice drinks aimed at children, and found half of them contained at least 19g – the maximum tots should have each day. 'Children should drink milk or water,' says Katharine. If they do have juice now and then, it's recommended that the serving is not more than 150ml.

KIDS ARE NEARLY FOUR TIMES MORE LIKELY TO CONSUME FIZZY DRINKS IF THEIR PARENTS HAVE THEM TOO

KIDS ALREADY HAVE A SWEET TOOTH? IT'S NOT TOO LATE

But, says Laura, when you start to change things, 'Don't try to make them go cold turkey; instead, you can dilute the taste by mixing sugary foods with a lower-sugar alternative so their taste buds adapt. If they've got used to Coco Pops for their breakfast, for example, start mixing this with a sugar-free puffed cereal, gradually changing the ratio to a greater amount of the sugar-free brand.'

You can try this tactic with other sweet foods and drinks as well.

DON'T BAN BIRTHDAY CAKE 'Let kids see sugar as a normal part of events such as parties, rather than making a big deal about it,' Katharine says. 'Once you start banning particular foods or linking them with treats or rewards, you develop associations that make those foods more tempting.'

SET A GOOD EXAMPLE Little eyes see everything!



Just one spoon of sugar and before you know it...

START AS YOU MEAN TO GO ON

The good news is that your baby won't mind if you start acting as sugar police. 'Breast milk, even though it contains natural sugars, isn't actually that sweet to taste – and so that's the level of sweetness your baby is used to,' says Katharine from Action on Sugar.

However, exposure to sweeter tastes as they get older will start to change their taste buds, and then just as baby food might taste bland to you, it will start to do so for them too. That's why it's really important that you try limiting a baby's sugar intake as much as possible from the moment you start to wean them.