



YOU CAN DO IT!

Cutting back on sugar isn't easy but it's the best thing you can do for your health. Here's realistic advice

BY SHANAAZ PRINCE

IT'S not easy to give up the sweet stuff. Sugar is in so much of what we eat and we tend to think life is pretty bland without it.

But sugar is coming under increasing criticism on the health front. "Added sugar is probably the single worst ingredient in the modern diet," says Paula Galvão, founder and CEO of Eden Life Wellness Clinic in Sandton, Johannesburg. "It interferes with hormones that regulate hunger and satiety [the sense of being full], harms your metabolism and leads to increased fat storage."

So how to go about cutting back on sugar? We asked experts for tips.

ACCEPT THAT IT WILL BE A CHALLENGE

There are no easy fixes – it will take discipline. One of the most important things to do when making a change to your eating habits is to get your mind ready. Remind yourself to commit to the goal every day – possibly even at every mealtime!

RETRAIN YOUR TASTE BUDS

We've conditioned ourselves, often unconsciously, to sweeter tastes and so we've become slaves to added sugar in our diets, says Maxine De Araujo, registered dietician in Johannesburg.

"The only way to appreciate natural sweetness again is to stop consuming refined sugar, usually for six to eight weeks," she says. "This lets your taste buds adapt

and begin to undo their desensitisation to sugar. In this time people often find they start to recognise the natural sweetness of foods such as sweet potato. And after this period they find they're unable to consume as much refined sugar as they used to."

DITCH THE ADDED SUGAR

There's a difference between naturally occurring sugars – such as those found in fruit and vegetables – and added sugar, which is found in most processed foods.

"Added sugar is not necessary for a healthy diet," De Araujo says. "A can of cool-drink contains about eight teaspoons of added sugar and absolutely no other necessary nutrients."

MAKE THESE SMART FOOD CHOICES

■ Stop buying processed foods. Ensure your plate is made up mostly of foods that are as close to their natural state as possible. This means more vegetables and fruit, meat, poultry and fish, plain nuts and seeds, and legumes such as dried beans, chickpeas and lentils.

■ Don't add sugar to coffee and tea. If you can't bear the thought of going cold turkey, start by cutting down to one teaspoon, then half a teaspoon, then nothing.

■ Choose drinks wisely. Make water your first choice and avoid sweetened drinks. "Limit fruit juice to half a cup a day and dilute it with water," De Araujo says. "You can also

use low-kilojoule, sugar-free cordials or opt for drinks with sugar-free flavourings such as vanilla and cinnamon."

■ Avoid sugary snacks. Opt for plain popcorn, plain nuts and seeds, biltong and fruit.

"But just because these foods are lower in sugar doesn't mean portion size doesn't matter," De Araujo warns. "For example, a snack portion of biltong would be about 25g."

Limit yourself to two fruit portions a day, she adds. While the sugar in fruit comes with the nutritional benefits of fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants, it's still best to watch your intake. Fresh fruit should be your first option, rather than dried. And if you do choose the latter, eat a maximum of a quarter cup a day, the kind with no added sugar.

Raw veggies with hummus also make a good snack, Galvão says. "Other good options are plain yoghurt with fruit, apple slices with nut butter, tuna on wholegrain crackers and homemade energy bars."

LEARN LABEL LINGO

"Ingredients are listed in descending order according to weight. So the main ingredient is listed first," Galvão says.

Avoid a product if the first ingredient is sugar (it could be called sucrose, dextrose, maltose, corn syrup or barley malt, among others). "The sugar content of breakfast cereals for children is shocking" says Hamish van Wyk, dietician and diabetes educator at the Centre for Diabetes and Endocrinology in Johannesburg. Opt for wholegrains with no added sugar such as oats and bran.