The Problem With Sugar-Free Diets

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Some good news for your sweet tooth: you don’t need to eliminate *all* sugar to keep a healthy diet.

At some point in your health journey, you’ve probably tried to **swear off sugar**. We’ve been there too. It’s easy to go down the rabbit hole of compulsively checking food labels and come out on the other side questioning if it’s still okay to eat fruit. (It is!)

The fact is, most of us could stand to cut back significantly. According to the **American Heart Association**, the average American consumes nearly 17 teaspoons of added sugar each day — roughly double the recommended limit for men, and triple the limit for women. This excessive intake is linked to a whole host of **cardiometabolic conditions**: obesity, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and more. It’s no wonder many of us are going to such great lengths to rid our systems of the stuff.

But for those already restricting, a new animal study offers some unexpected nuances worth considering. The **findings**, which were presented at the ENDO 2026 conference in Chicago, showed that in mice, a diet fully free of table sugar led to inflammation, poor blood sugar control, and disrupted gut health.

“While eating too much sugar is not healthy, cutting out all sugar, especially in a low-fat diet, can upset the balance of good bacteria in your gut, cause inflammation, and make it harder for your body to manage blood sugar,” **Rasheed Ahmad**, PhD, principal scientist and head of the department of immunology & microbiology at the Dasman Diabetes Institute in Kuwait, told Super Age in an email. “This means that avoiding sugar completely might not always lead to better health, and having a balanced diet is important for keeping your gut and body healthy.”

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Cutting Out Sugar May Not Be Risk-Free

First, an important note: Animal studies don't always translate to human biology, so it's important to view this study as a clue, not a conclusion. That said, they also play an important role in nutrition research in the sense that most of what we now know about nutrition and metabolism was first observed in animal models and then confirmed or refined in human trials. This study is also not the first to **question previous sugar recommendations**.

"These results help us understand how diet can affect the body, but they don't mean people should suddenly change their eating habits based only on this study," Ahmad said. "The main message is that having a balanced diet is important. Completely removing sugar, especially in a low-fat diet, may not always be healthier."

If you've ever tried the keto diet, you may have experienced some of the effects of a very low-sugar diet. Following the keto diet means restricting or eliminating **carbohydrates** — a macronutrient that breaks down into glucose — like fruits, juice, and snack foods. Some people experience **"keto flu,"** marked by fatigue, nausea, and headaches.

When people go on low-sugar diets, they may also look for sugar-free alternatives. **Evidence** shows that certain artificial and calorie-free sweeteners can harm blood sugar control and may disrupt the gut microbiome. And importantly, completely cutting out all sugar would mean forgoing fruit, keeping you from key nutrients like fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

“Our research suggests that a healthy diet is about more than just avoiding sugar — it’s about supporting a healthy gut and overall balance. We encourage readers to focus on variety and moderation, and to consult health professionals before making big changes to their diet,” Ahmad said.

Focus on a Balanced, Low Added Sugar Diet

The old Food Pyramid placed sweets on the top as something to “use sparingly.” Now, some people only whisper the word “sugar,” ashamed that they enjoyed a sweet treat. (There’s evidence to suggest this level of stress around food may independently lead to **gastrointestinal problems**.)

Rather than fixating on a completely sugar-free diet, consider prioritizing complex carbs over ultraprocessed foods with added sugars. Make sure to get enough fiber (a **complex carbohydrate**) from foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts, and cut back on foods with added sugars like donuts and soda.

And, because it’s natural to crave these foods on occasion, plan to enjoy them in moderation. The **American Heart Association** recommends that men should limit added sugars to less than 9 teaspoons per day, and women should limit to less than 6 teaspoons.

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