

THE HIDDEN DANGERS OF SUGAR: HOW IT AFFECTS MENTAL HEALTH

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IT'S NO secret that doctors warn us about sugar. From childhood, we've been told to “cut down on sweets” to protect our teeth, manage weight, and prevent diabetes.



But there's another reason why health experts are increasingly pushing us to rethink our sugar habits – our mental health is at stake.

At first glance, sugar seems harmless. It's everywhere, from the sugary cereal we eat in the morning to the comforting desserts we indulge in after a long day.

For many, sugary treats are not just food; they're a source of joy, a way to celebrate, or even a quick fix for a bad mood. So, it's easy to overlook the potential damage.

But here's the thing: while sugar can give us that temporary “high”, it often leads to long-term lows. More and more research is showing that there's a link between high sugar intake and mental well-being. This isn't just about the occasional sugar rush or feeling sluggish after binging on sweets. There's growing evidence that regularly consuming too much sugar might contribute to anxiety, depression and mood swings.

Emerging research suggests a definitive link between high sugar intake and mental well-being. Regularly consuming excessive sugar might be fuelling feelings of anxiety, depression and mood fluctuations.

Alarming, while the World Health Organisation recommends a daily intake of no more than 30 grams of added sugars (equivalent to about seven teaspoons), reports indicate many South Africans are consuming up to 100 grams daily – approximately 24 teaspoons.

This stark reality raises red flags not only for our physical health but also shines a spotlight on the less-discussed effects of sugar on mental health.

This Mental Health Awareness Month, we explore these troubling insights with guidance from Mbali Mapholi, a registered dietitian and partner with Tetley, who shared crucial information on how our daily sugar overload could be eating away at our mental well-being.

The unwelcome effects of added sugar on mental health

According to Mapholi, the overconsumption of added sugar has several direct consequences on mental health, that many people remain unaware of. Here's how sugar disrupts our emotional balance:

Mood swings: Eating foods high in added sugars, like candy, soda, and processed snacks, leads to rapid spikes in blood sugar, followed by a sudden drop.

This rollercoaster effect can cause mood swings, irritability, and fatigue. Unlike natural sugars found in fruits or dairy that are digested slowly, added sugars create quick highs and lows in blood sugar levels that disrupt brain function and lead to emotional instability.

Anxiety: Excess sugar consumption is also linked to increased anxiety and stress. Mapholi explained that sugar affects neurotransmitters like serotonin and dopamine, which regulate our mood.

At the same time, high sugar intake raises cortisol levels, the hormone responsible for stress. This combination can worsen anxiety and even lead to depressive symptoms.

Poor focus and concentration:

While sugar can give you a quick energy boost, it's often followed by a crash that leaves you feeling unfocused and mentally fatigued. This "sugar crash" can impair concentration, making it harder to stay alert.

Over time, a diet high in added sugars could even impact cognitive function, memory, and decision-making.

Simple ways to cut down on added sugars

Mapholi shared practical tips for reducing sugar at home:

Be smart with your choice of drinks

Sugary drinks are a major source of added sugars. Instead, try fun alternatives like homemade iced teas or warm teas which are naturally free from added sugars.

Read food labels

Packaged foods often contain hidden sugars, even in items that don't seem particularly sweet. Be on the lookout for ingredients like high fructose corn syrup, sucrose, or dextrose.

Choose products labelled "unsweetened" or those with minimal added sugars. As a general guide, low-added sugar is considered 5 grams or less per 100 grams or 100 ml, while anything over 15 grams is considered high. **Snack smart**

There's a big difference between a snack and a treat. A snack should be a small, nutrient-dense mini-meal, while a treat is usually something high in sugar. Instead of grabbing sugary snacks, opt for healthier options like raw nuts, seeds, or fresh fruit. Pairing fruit with protein-rich foods like yoghurt or nuts can offer sustained energy without the sugar spikes.

Cook and bake at home

Preparing meals at home gives you full control over the ingredients, including sugar. Try reducing the sugar in your favourite recipes or substitute it with natural sweeteners like dates or pure honey.

When you make food yourself, you can enjoy your treats without worrying about hidden sugars.

Gradually reduce sugary add-ons If you usually add sugar to your coffee, tea, or cereal, try to reduce the amount slowly over time. Your

taste buds will adjust, and eventually, you'll find that you don't need as much sugar to enjoy your favourite foods and drinks.

"We need to offer solutions, not just highlight the problem."

With these tips, you can start making healthier choices today, without feeling like you're missing out, explained Candice Sessions, Tetley Tea Marketing Manager.