HOW DOES SUGAR AFFECT OUR HEART HEALTH?

Irish Daily Star · 6 Dec 2025 · 26

New research suggests that limiting sugar during pregnancy and the first two years of life can have lasting benefits for our heart health.

The study, published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ), looked at 63,433 people born between October 1951 and March 1956 with no history of heart disease, and from this compared 40,063 people exposed to sugar rationing between 1940 and
1953 with 23,370 people who were not.

They found that those who had sugar restricted during the time of pregnancy and in the first two years of life, compared with people never exposed to rationing, had a 20% lower risk of heart disease, 25% lower risk of heart attack, 26% lower risk of heart failure, atrial fibrillation (24%), stroke (31%), and cardiovascular death (27%).

We spoke to Dr Oliver Guttmann, consultant cardiologist, to find out exactly how sugar can affect our heart health.

What immediate/short term effects can eating sugar have on our heart?

“If you have a lot of sugar at once, it can increase your blood pressure and increase your heart rate in the short term,” says Guttmann. “A big sugary meal, for example, can cause your heart rate to be a bit faster because your body has to work harder to manage the increased level of blood sugar.

“That is why sometime people say they are experiencing heart palpitations after they eat something really sugary.”

What long-term effects can consuming lots of sugar have on our heart?

“Over time, high sugar intake can cause very chronic lowgrade inflammation and high blood pressure that can cause extra strain on the heart, which can increase the risk of heart disease,” says Guttmann.

“High consumption of sugar, especially refined sugars, can sometimes raise the level of the “bad” cholesterol LDL (low-density lipoprotein) over time and lower the level of the good cholesterol (high-density lipoprotein, HDL),” says Guttmann. “High LDLS over time can harden the arteries, which can lead to heart attacks and strokes.

“If you have a lot of sugar over prolonged periods, then there is a risk of obesity,”adds Guttmann. “A higher body weight can increase your risk of high cholesterol levels and blood pressure, which are major risk factors of type 2 diabetes. Additionally, high blood sugars over a long time can lead to insulin resistance and increase the risk of diabetes.

“Stroke and heart attacks are always the things we talk about when it comes to heart health, and they usually happen when you get furring of the arteries,” says Guttmann. “Furring makes the blood vessels tighter and more narrow over time.”