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Sugar's bitter effect on heart health

New Straits Times · 2 Jan 2025 · 12

DO you feel guilty every time you eat candy or cake? But what about when you sip your favourite soda or fruit juice? Swedish scientists have discovered that sugary drinks are associated with an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease, whereas this is not necessarily the case for sweet treats eaten on an occasional (and we do mean occasional!) basis.

Whether in the form of sucrose, fructose or maltose, all forms sugar should be consumed in moderation, the health authorities caution.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), for example, recommends limiting sugar consumption to no more than 10 per cent of total energy intake, which is equivalent to 50g of sugar when daily meals total 2,000 calories.

Consumer organisations have long been warning about the dangers of hidden sugars in a wide range of foods, making it all the more complicated to keep track of your daily sugar intake. Now, a Swedish study published in the scientific journal 'Frontiers in Public Health' sheds fresh light on long-held ideas on this subject, such as avoiding sweet treats at all costs.

The findings paint a more nuanced picture, and once again raise the subject of the excessive sugar content of certain drinks, including fruit juices. This type of beverage is known to contain proportions of sugars in excess of WHO guidelines, and it is usually considered better to bite into an apple rather than drink its juice.

This new study of some 70,000 people in Sweden, followed for 22 years from 1997 onwards, sounds the alarm about the harmful effects of sugary drinks, which can be worse than forms of sugar found in other sweet treats.

The explanation is quite logical: "Liquid sugars, found in sweetened beverages, typically provide less satiety than solid forms - they make you feel less full — potentially leading to

overconsumption," explains Suzanne Janzi, PhD candidate at Lund University and corresponding author of the paper.

In fact, this analysis shows that it's not just about sugar as a whole, but rather about the way it is consumed.

"This surprising contrast highlights the importance of considering not just the amount of sugar consumed, but also its source and context," adds the scientist. And the findings shouldn't be taken lightly, since our cardiovascular health could be at stake. The scientists found that drinking sweet drinks was worse for cardiovascular health than any other form of sugar. In fact, drinking more sweetened drinks significantly increased the risk of ischemic stroke, heart failure, atrial fibrillation and abdominal aortic aneurysm.

And while this study seemingly lets us off the hook for eating the occasional (and we do mean occasional!) sweet treat, the researchers also found that the occasional indulgence could be better than banishing sugar entirely.

"While our observational study cannot establish causation, these findings suggest that extremely low sugar intake may not be necessary or beneficial for cardiovascular health," says Janzi.

Ultimately, the researchers conclude in a news release that "the highest risks of a negative health outcome arose in the lowest intake category for treats. Consuming occasional treats was associated with better outcomes than no treats at all".

That said, take it easy on the candy! Previous research, conducted by the French consumer group 60 millions de consommateurs, has highlighted the amount of colourants, additives and even nanoparticles found in certain candy and other sweet treats.