

The image features two wooden spoons, one in front of the other, both filled to the brim with white sugar granules. The spoons are set against a dark, almost black background that is covered in a fine, sparkling dust of sugar, creating a dramatic, high-contrast effect. The lighting highlights the texture of the sugar and the natural grain of the wood.

# SUGAR

**a sweet poison**

*By Nancy Castro-Leal*



# SUGAR – A SWEET POISON

**What things do you associate with sugar?**

We associate sugar with a sweet taste and feeling; with sweet personal qualities; with warm and protective hugs; and with people we can trust because they are good. We also often hear the expression, "you have a sweet character" or "have sweet dreams".

Sugar is associated with 'sweetness'. But it is also associated with chronic illness, bad health, or misleading propaganda that the food industry uses to force us to buy their products.

Professionals from different disciplines have started to take an interest in sugar consumption. This has exposed the abuse that goes with the promotion of sugar, the abuse we can unknowingly be a victim of.



# Global sugar consumption

Globally one person consumes 24kg of sugar per year, according to a study done by the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The study looked at averages between 2012 to 2014. Brazil has the highest levels of sugar consumption in the world - on average, one person consumes 67.3kg of sugar per year. South Africa is fast catching up. Our average sugar consumption per year is 40.8kg, nearly double the international average.

Compared with the rest of the world, Africa consumes the least sugar. The average sugar consumption for South Africa, however, is exceptionally high compared to other countries on the continent. Only Egypt - with an average of 41.9kg per year - consumes more sugar than South Africa.

The WHO guidelines identify 25 grams, or 6 teaspoons, as what can be considered a healthy portion of sugar per person per day. If we calculate 25 grams x 365 days, it would equal 9 125 grams per year. 9 125 grams equals approximately 9.13 kg of sugar per year per person.

Six teaspoons, or

# 25g

**WHO guideline for a healthy portion of sugar per person per day.**

With an average consumption of 40.8 kg, South Africa is well over the recommended amounts. If we take the WHO recommended amount of 9.13 kg, it means each person consumes, on average, 31.67 kg more sugar per year than what is healthy for the body. Simply put, one person, on average, consumes sugar meant for 4.5 people per year. It's pretty horrific, and there's more. Here we only considered 'added sugar' and not 'natural sugar'.

Added sugar is the sugar we add to the food we prepare or use in our homes, for example, baked cupcakes and tea, or processed foods like factory-produced sweets and soft drinks.

Some serviettes, tissue, toilet paper and writing paper are made from sugar cane.



**DID  
YOU  
KNOW?**

Natural sugar is found in fruits, vegetables, grain, milk and all the agricultural and animal products we eat daily. If we add 40.8kg of added sugar to the natural sugar we consume, the figure is suicidal.

## The history of sugar

How did we arrive at this point? We need to understand the history of sugar to understand what happened.

Sugar cane has been used for many years. Researchers have traced the commodity and believe it was first used more than 5000 years ago. Sugar cane is believed to have started growing in New Guinea, a small Island in the Pacific Ocean north of Australia. From there, sugar cane was carried to India by merchants.

It became known as the "Indian honey" because the cane produced a syrup that tasted and looked like honey, albeit without the intervention of bees. Sugar cane arrived on the African continent via Egypt, which, in the ninth century had processed sugar, with pharmacies selling it as a fortifying tonic with curative powers.

In Europe during the Middle Ages sugar was only used by the nobility. It was expensive and scarce. Ordinary people used honey. Sugar was even used as a currency for paying for goods and products.

In the fifteenth century, Christopher Columbus transported sugar cane during one of his exploratory trips that led to the



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**Merchants brought sugarcane to India from New Guinea from where it is believed to have began growing.**  
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discovery and colonising of the Americas. Sugar cane arrived in what is today the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean Sea. Its cultivation was popularised first in the Americas and then in the rest of the world.

In the sixteenth century, people across the world were starting to consume more sugar than honey. By the eighteenth century, the consumption of sugar was generalised across the world.

The global sugar industry became one of the important industries in the nineteenth century. Sugar consumption increased significantly at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, people's health and public health budgets were affected.

The first soft drinks appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and were sold as healthy and affordable energy beverages.

Many beauty products that you use, use sugar in the production process.



**DID YOU KNOW?**

In the mid-twentieth century, soft drinks featured on the majority of dinner tables across the world. The food industry introduced sugar as an essential flavouring in processed foods in the twenty-first century. Chicken and fish nuggets, packet chips, syrupy drinks, hot dogs, burgers, cereals and biscuits are some of the foods containing sugar as an essential flavouring.

Sugar is also widely used for conserving ultra-processed foods, such as refined bread, flour and cereals; industrially produced biscuits and cakes, jam and marmalade, tinned vegetables and fruit; and processed meats and polonies and deep-frozen chicken. The use of sugar as a food conservative was legalised to enable the food industry to store food for long periods.



## Sugar and addiction

It is important to understand that sugar is addictive and that the food industry plays a role in creating addiction.

We become addicted to sugar as we incrementally use it in our natural food. Now we cook our vegetables with sugar to have a taste we like and also add sugar to our fruits! We are also increasingly using more spoons of sugar in tea and coffee. We now believe that for food to have flavour, it needs to have a lot of sugar.

Because the sweet flavour is addictive, we over-eat, meaning we need to buy more. Meanwhile, the food industry profits from the increased consumer demand.



Sugar is used in cheesemaking.



# How do our bodies absorb and use the sugar we consume?

The most important function of sugar in our bodies is to produce energy. We need energy for our muscles to work and for our brains to function. It is hard to imagine a person who tastes sugar for the first time saying, 'this does not taste nice'. From young children to the elderly, everyone takes pleasure in consuming sugar. Hence, we must have accurate information on sugar and the amounts to consume.

On the one hand, we have something that tastes nice because it gives immediate pleasure but can be harmful, but on the other hand, we have food that can taste nice while providing for all that is needed for a good, functioning healthy body. We need to balance the scale.

Sugar gives us energy and helps our bodies to absorb proteins and grow tissues. It is also important to note that sugar does not create any kind of allergy in the body. Yet, excessive consumption of sugar can be poisonous.

If we ingest more sugar than we need we can develop chronic illnesses that cause disabilities and can even lead to death. Obesity,

cardiovascular problems, diabetes and tooth cavities are easy to detect as consequences of abusing sugar. Damage to the liver and kidneys; memory, hearing and sight loss; and certain types of cancers. These diseases can also result from abusing sugar but are more difficult to directly connect to the use of the commodity.

Sugar begins working from the moment we put it in our mouths. If your blood sugar is low and you suck a small sweet, it helps to normalise the sugar levels quickly and prevent unconsciousness. But if you suck a sweet regularly, it can cause tooth cavities and you will need expensive and painful treatment to save your teeth. In this way, we can see that sugar helps with the functioning of the body if used in amounts that are appropriate for what the body needs. But if the limits are exceeded, our organs start to malfunction and eventually collapse. The liver, kidneys, heart, brain and pancreas stop working if we force them to operate with high levels of sugar. This situation is easy to avoid if we do not oblige our organs to work more than necessary trying to process and utilise the excess sugar that we are



consuming. Our bodies do not normally eliminate all the unused sugar after the energy we need is produced. After our brain and muscles use the sugar needed for energy, the excess sugar is stored in the liver and in the muscles for future use. But if we consume more sugar than necessary daily it will be impossible to use all the reserves that our liver and muscles accumulate over time. This situation inevitably results in diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular complications.

To have good health does not mean avoiding sugar. Rather, use sugar in moderation so that our bodies can utilise it optimally. Drinking water and exercising regularly can prevent the storage of excess sugar.

Remember, the more natural foods you eat the healthier you are.



# SUGAR CONCENTRATION

Do you know the fruits and vegetables that have a lot of natural sugar?

## Fruits

Banana  
Grapes  
Orange  
Watermelon  
Mango  
Dates  
Pineapple

## Vegetables

Beetroot  
Carrots  
Onion  
Purple cabbage  
Tomatoes  
Brinjals  
Sweet potato

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

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