

Sugar vs. Artificial Sweeteners

By Cara Rosenbloom, RD

Craving sweets is common, and it's fine to indulge occasionally as part of a nutritious eating plan. You may wonder whether it's better to choose sweet foods and beverages that are made with sugar or with artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame or sucralose. The truth is, there's no clear winner.

Sugar has 15 calories and 4 grams of carbohydrate per teaspoon. Nutrition guidelines recommend no more than 12 teaspoons of added sugars per day. Some people prefer the taste of sugar compared to artificial sweeteners, and appreciate that it's more natural rather than artificial. But sugar has been linked with tooth decay, and excess amounts (above 12 teaspoons per day) have been linked to weight gain, heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. For context, a can of soda contains 10 teaspoons sugar.

Artificial sweeteners are much sweeter than sugar, but have zero calories and usually no carbohydrates. People with type 2 diabetes may prefer artificial sweeteners over sugar because they have less effect on blood sugar levels. And people looking to lose weight may choose artificial sweeteners due to their lower calorie count. Here's where it gets murky: Some studies show that artificial sweeteners may actually increase the risk of weight gain, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. The research is ongoing.

Bottom line: Choose whichever you prefer, since both are fine in small amounts. But overall, it's best to simply choose fewer sweets, such as soft drinks, candy, pastries, ice cream and chocolate, whether they are made with sugar or artificial sweeteners. These foods are considered treats, not staple foods, so limit your intake no matter how they are sweetened.



Asthma Advice

May is Asthma and Allergy Awareness Month.



Asthma is a chronic condition of the lungs' airways, causing them to narrow and become inflamed. This produces coughing, wheezing and difficulty breathing. For some people, asthma is a minor nuisance. For others, it can be a major problem that interferes with daily activities and may lead to life-threatening asthma attacks.

Respiratory viruses, including colds or flu, can worsen your asthmatic symptoms. If you have moderate-to-severe asthma, your risk of being hospitalized for COVID-19 increases.

While asthma can't be cured, its symptoms can be controlled. And because asthma often changes over time, it's important that you work with your health care provider to track your signs, manage symptoms and adjust treatment as needed.

If you have asthma, you may not know the precautions for reducing symptoms and your risk for asthma attacks and serious illness.

As a reminder:

- Avoid smoking and secondhand smoke.
- Avoid air pollution from factories, cars and wildfire smoke.
- Reduce exposure to dust and dust mites.
- Use a vacuum with a HEPA filter.
- Use a HEPA air purifier.
- Avoid using sprays.
- Make sure you have good air ventilation.



Sinus infections, allergies and acid reflux can increase asthma attacks. Other triggers: physical exercise, high humidity, breathing in cold, dry air, some foods, food additives and fragrances.

Know the signs that your asthma may be worsening: more frequent, bothersome symptoms; increasing difficulty breathing, as measured with a peak flow meter; and needing to use a quick-relief inhaler more often.

Learning to recognize a stroke saves lives.

During **Stroke Awareness Month**, learn about **FAST**, a quick way to know if someone is probably having a stroke:

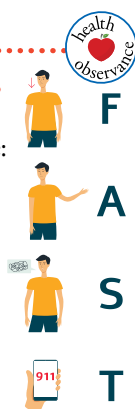
F - Face drooping on one side?

A - Arms don't both stay upright when raised?

S - Speech is slurred or strange?

T - Time to call 911 for urgent medical assistance if you note any or all of the FAST symptoms.

Visit [stroke.org](https://www.stroke.org) to learn more.





May is
Arthritis
Awareness
Month.

Arthritis and You

After decades of hard work, your joints will degenerate or erode to some degree.

The most common form of joint disease is **osteoarthritis**, which:

- Is the leading cause of physical disability in the U.S.
- Occurs with thinning of the cartilage, a rubbery tissue that covers and cushions the ends of your bones where they form joints.
- Primarily affects the hips, knees, lower back, hands and neck.
- Causes inflammation, pain, stiffness and reduced function at the affected joint.

Primary triggers include past joint injuries, aging and being overweight. To protect your bones:

- **Lose excess weight to decrease stress on your joints.** The more overweight you are, the earlier the potential onset of OA.
- **Strengthen the muscles around your joints** to help slow OA progression and reduce cartilage damage. For example, moderate strength training of your quadriceps (thigh muscles) can reduce the pain of OA in your hips, knees and back.
- **Physical therapy and stretching techniques** can often help control the progression of OA and help protect your mobility.
- **Long-term sitting can tighten muscles and stiffen joints.** If you have OA, you need daily physical activity to maintain your joint function.
- **During exercise and sports** stay aware to avoid trauma or major overuse of your joints.
- **Choose more anti-inflammatory foods**, such as fatty fish, vegetables and fruit. Studies suggest the Mediterranean-style diet may help improve OA symptoms. Get enough calcium, vitamin D and vitamin K, which help improve bone strength. Avoid smoking and limit alcohol use.

If you have persistent joint pain, consult your health care provider for advice on reducing its effects.

Fitness Parks

Public parks can be more than places for walks and picnics.

In fact, there's a movement to provide accessible fitness equipment in parks, creating free fitness parks, to promote regular physical activity for more people.

Physical activity is a national health priority, according to the CDC.

Regular exercise lowers the risk for health problems ranging from type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease to depression and anxiety disorders. What's more, as people begin using local parks to exercise more, research shows residents of nearby neighborhoods often are inspired to take the initiative and pursue a healthier lifestyle.

You won't find the high-tech fitness equipment common in indoor gyms at fitness parks, and the equipment available often varies between locations. But, according to research, you are likely to find weather-resistant tools for strength building, balance and aerobic exercise, including ski machines, push-up bars, balance beams, rope climbs and equipment for performing leg presses.



Many communities don't have the resources to build new outdoor fitness spaces in parks. But there's good news: Nonprofit organizations, including FitLot and AARP, are helping towns throughout the U.S. build more outdoor fitness parks so more people can enjoy an active lifestyle.

To see if there's a fitness park near you, visit the FitLot map at fitlot.org/parks/ or search for outdoor fitness parks and your location.

Q: Risks for high blood pressure?

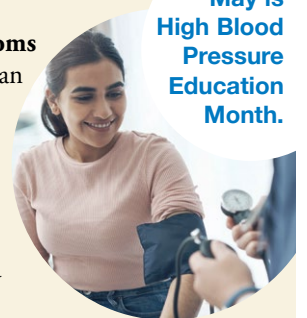
A: High blood pressure usually causes no symptoms but can lead to heart disease and stroke. The American Heart Association recommends blood pressure checks at least every two years starting at age 20 — or more often if it's high, or you're at increased risk. High blood pressure risks include:

Factors you can't modify: Increased age, family history of hypertension and African American ancestry can increase your risk for high blood pressure.

Factors you may be able to modify: People who are overweight or obese have a higher risk of hypertension. Inadequate physical activity, excess stress, smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke, and consumption of too much salt or not enough potassium can elevate your blood pressure. So can drinking more than one drink daily for women or two daily for men. Chronic conditions, such as kidney disease, diabetes and sleep apnea, also increase the risk for high blood pressure. — Elizabeth Smoots, MD



May is
High Blood
Pressure
Education
Month.



Note: Due to production lead time, this issue may not reflect the current COVID-19 situation in some or all regions of the U.S. For the most up-to-date information visit coronavirus.gov.

The **Smart Moves Toolkit**, including this issue's printable download, **Safety Corner: Green Thumb**, is at personalbest.com/extras/22V5tools.



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