

Chapter 1

Moving from Sugar Addiction to Sugar Reduction

In This Chapter

- ▶ Explaining the nature of sugar addiction
 - ▶ Taking the first steps of your low-sugar journey
 - ▶ Turning your life around by changing your thinking
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In small amounts, sugar is an innocuous substance. Every cell in your body needs sugar (glucose) to survive and function, so your digestive system breaks down the carbohydrates you eat into glucose to fuel your body. A major problem with the modern diet is that sugar is present in enormous amounts instead of in the small amounts found in natural foods. Processed foods, sweetened beverages, engineered sweeteners, and refined grains are pervasive in the Western food supply, overloading your body with unmanageable amounts of sugar and chemicals.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that sugar is just as addictive as cocaine. It acts on the pleasure center of the brain just like alcohol and heroin, so the more you eat, the more you want. Combine sugar's addictive nature with its omnipresence in society, and you get a recipe for a global health disaster. Reaching for yummy, quick, and convenient "food" during a stressful, time-crunched day is all too easy for people, and eventually they become addicted — both to the sugar and to the crazy lifestyle that leads them to it.

My goal is to guide you through the steps you need to take, both physically and emotionally, to wean yourself away from relying on sugar. This book will be helpful not only for the sugar addict but also for those who may not be truly addicted but who are searching for ways to decrease their reliance on stress eating and convenience foods in order to live a healthier lifestyle.

As you read this chapter, you'll start to understand the magnitude of the harmful effects that overdosing on sugar has on your body and the reasons

why sugar can be so addictive. I share some easy tips to improve your eating without being neurotic or trying to be perfect. Best of all, you get a chance to start unraveling the psychology of your sugar abuse and to start looking at how you can begin to change your life by changing your thinking.

Understanding Sugar Addiction

As a species, humans evolved eating the small amounts of sugar found naturally in fruits and plants. Today, the modern American consumes more than 130 pounds of sugar each year, half of which comes from artificial corn sweeteners. Your body isn't designed to handle the massive load of sugar that the modern diet thrusts upon you, and the United States shoulders the embarrassing obesity, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome statistics to prove it, as shown in Figures 1-1 and 1-2. (Statistics compiled from the Harvard School of Public Health, the National Institutes of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)

People are designed to crave high-energy foods like sugar. In nature, sweet taste means high calories, and to your ancestors, those calories could have made the difference between survival and starvation. Sugar also stimulates the release of feel-good chemicals in your brain, making you crave not only sugar's calories but also its sweet sensations.

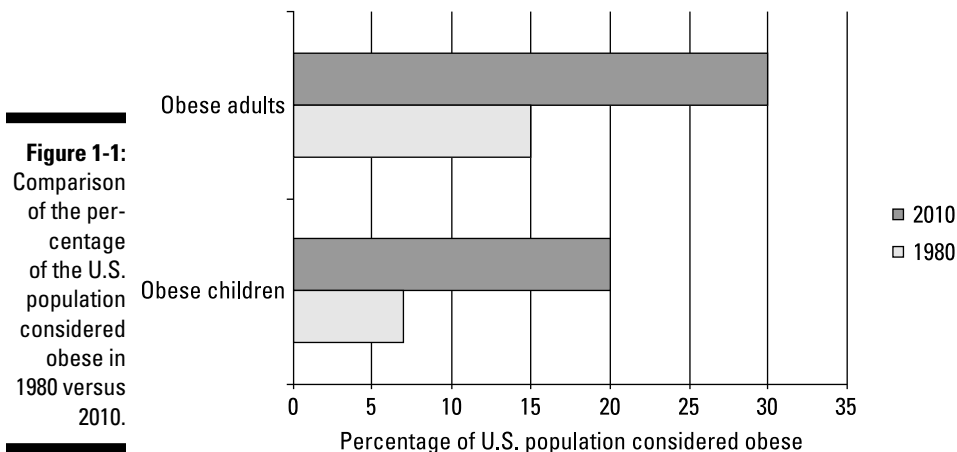
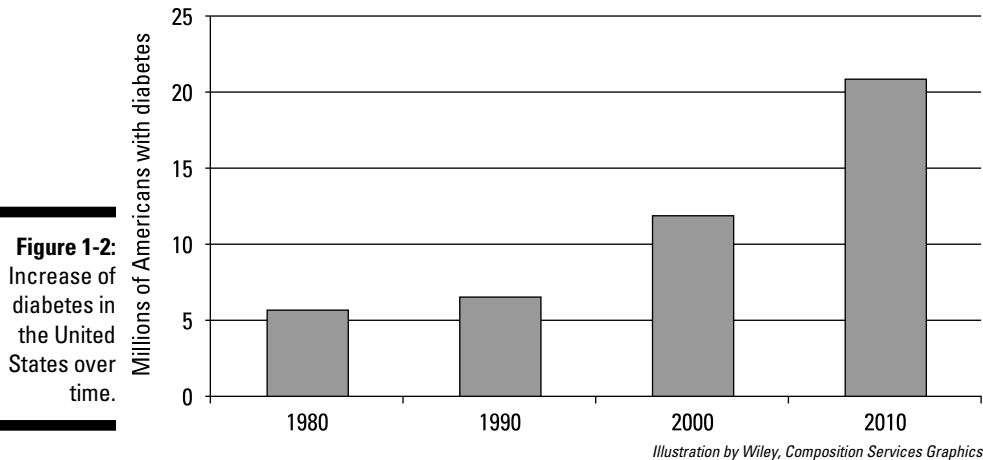


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Defining sugar addiction

An *addiction* is anything that one must have to avoid a negative feeling or symptom, or the compulsion to artificially produce a pleasurable sensation. Sugar addicts use sugar as an energy booster (to avoid feeling tired and hungry) and a mood lifter because sugar triggers the production of *serotonin* and *dopamine*, which are hormones that make you feel happy and satisfied. (Alcohol and cocaine are other addictive substances that trigger serotonin and dopamine production.) As with drugs or other addictive substances, those who abuse sugar develop a tolerance to its effects and need more and more of it to yield the same rewards.

You're probably a sugar addict if one or more of the following descriptions rings true for you:

- ✔ Without sugar, you suffer extreme fatigue or have trouble concentrating.
- ✔ You eat sugar compulsively, even though you realize the negative consequences.
- ✔ You experience physical withdrawal symptoms if you go without sugar for a day or two.
- ✔ You find yourself obsessing over what your next sweet treat will be and when you get to have it.
- ✔ You hide your sugar consumption from other people or lie about your eating behavior.
- ✔ You need more and more sugar to experience the boost. Foods that used to taste sweet to you don't seem so sweet anymore.

- ✔ You repeatedly eat too much sugar, even though you promise yourself that you'll never do it again.
- ✔ You turn to sugar for an emotional lift, such as when you feel lonely or when you've had a bad day.

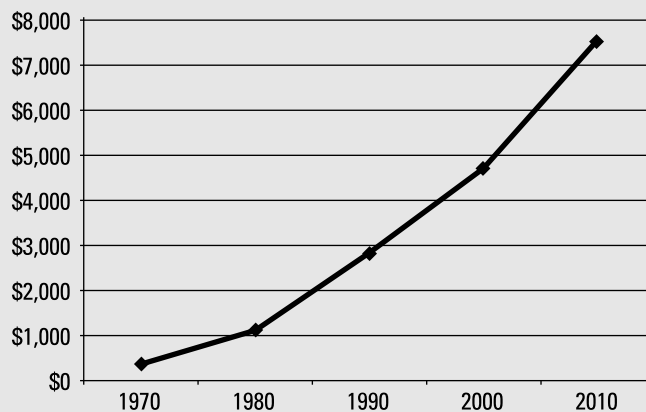
Weighing the global ramifications of sugar

Because overconsumption of sugar causes so many health problems, it places an enormous burden on an already struggling healthcare system (see Chapter 4 for more info on the health hazards of sugar and its consequences on the healthcare system). Here are some examples:

- ✔ **Shocking obesity statistics:** Obesity rates have doubled in the United States over the last 30 years, with a full two-thirds of Americans currently overweight or obese — making it statistically unusual not to be fat! The skyrocketing number of obese individuals worldwide runs parallel to the increase in the consumption of sugar and high-fructose corn syrup over the same 30-year span.
- ✔ **Diabetes woes:** The American Diabetes Association reports that about 9 percent of Americans, both children and adults, have diabetes, with millions more diagnosed every year. In addition, 80 million Americans

have pre-diabetes (insulin resistance). The International Diabetes Federation estimates that global healthcare expenditures to treat diabetes and prevent complications total at least \$465 billion annually.

- ✔ **Healthcare costs crisis:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that obesity costs the U.S. healthcare system more than \$150 billion each year and that diabetic patients spend twice as much on healthcare as non-diabetic patients. With the consistent rise in the rates of obesity and diabetes in the developed world (along with the concomitant rise in related diseases and conditions), the cost of treating these “lifestyle diseases” will take a bigger and bigger chunk of your paycheck (see the following figure), until good nutrition and regular exercise become normal instead of health-nut behavior. (Statistics compiled from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010.)



In Chapter 2, I categorize four types of stereotypical sugar addicts: the Exhausted Addict, the Sad Eater, the Undereater, and the Sugar Stalker. Head to Chapter 2 and take the quizzes to find out what kind of sugar addict (or which combination of addicts) you are so that you can figure out how best to change your eating habits and your lifestyle to become sugar-free.

Realizing how harmful sugar can be

Sugar, in all but the smallest amounts, is an addictive toxin and a driving force (or at least an aggravating factor) behind obesity, diabetes, liver disease, autoimmune disorders, chronic fatigue, hypothyroid disease, high cholesterol, osteoporosis, and metabolic syndrome.

These days the damaging diet begins in childhood, and as a result, young people are experiencing the devastating conditions and illnesses formerly reserved for the aging. Childhood obesity and diabetes are at an all-time high, leading most experts to believe that young people will have major problems much earlier in life because of their junk-food diet.

One of the most dangerous and seldom-discussed effects of a high-sugar diet is *tissue glycation*. Sugar causes a harmful chemical reaction in the tissues, forming molecules called *advanced glycation end products* (AGEs) that make your tissues stiffer and less elastic. The more sugar you eat, the more AGEs you develop, and these damaging molecules cause wrinkles, cataracts, stiff muscles, vascular disease, and brain damage — sugar literally shrinks your brain!

Getting Off Sugar without Driving Yourself Crazy

Despite what you may believe, getting off sugar and eating a healthier diet don't require superhuman discipline, some infomercial's "secret" pills, or a lifetime dedicated to eating like a rabbit. Try these easy steps to begin your journey, and consult Chapter 9 for more details:

- ✓ **Keep sugar and junk food out of your house.** You can't eat what you don't have! Remove the obvious culprits like soda, candy, brownies, cake, and pastries; also get rid of fruit juice, white flour products, dried fruit, energy drinks, and anything with the word *syrup* in the first five ingredients. See Chapter 3 for more information about carbohydrates and hidden sources of sugar that you may not be aware of, and consult Chapter 6 for tips on how to do a successful kitchen makeover.

- ✔ **Eat enough during the day.** Eating a combination of protein and carbohydrates (preferably from vegetables) every few hours helps keep your blood sugar levels stable and prevents your appetite from getting out of control. When blood sugar levels drop too low, you become ravenously hungry, and you're more likely to grab whatever convenience food is handy. Not eating enough during the day is one of the primary causes of overeating at night, which contributes to weight gain and late-night cravings. Turn to Chapter 5 for a lesson in putting together healthy combinations of protein and carbs throughout the day.
- ✔ **Get enough sleep.** Lack of sleep, stress, and sugar cravings create a vicious circle of frustration and fatigue. Stress keeps you up at night, so during the day you walk around exhausted, which increases your desire to use sugar as a convenient pick-me-up. High sugar consumption creates an inflammatory response in your body that creates more physical stress. Reducing your dependence on sugar does much more than just help you sleep better; visit Chapter 7 to find out additional ways that a sugar detox can benefit you.
- ✔ **Stop eating fat-free.** You may still be conditioned from the 1990s to think that fat-free versions of foods are healthier than their natural counterparts, but there's much more to the equation than just counting fat grams. Manufacturers of fat-free foods typically add more sugar and artificial ingredients to make up for the missing fat, so you do your body a favor if you stick to natural foods instead of fat-free, processed products. An exception to this is whole milk — it's a good idea to choose a lower-fat version (skim or 1 percent) that contains less saturated fat.
- ✔ **When you go out to eat at restaurants or special events, don't go hungry.** Restaurants are notorious for serving up three times as much food as you need (topped with lots of high-calorie sauces) and for presenting a tantalizing dessert menu to boot. Special events like parties and receptions are often sugar fests, with nothing but junk food and alcohol as far as the eye can see. To help you make sensible choices while you're out, eat a handful of a protein or high-fiber snack (such as a few bites of leftover chicken, a handful of almonds, or half an apple) before you head out. Chapter 10 is all about surviving restaurants, special events, and holidays.
- ✔ **Get regular exercise.** Exercise has more health benefits than anything else on the planet, period. Regular exercise helps stave off sugar cravings, boosts your energy, and tones your muscles. Exercise is essential for diabetics because it improves insulin sensitivity. Investigate Chapter 12 for an overview of constructing a basic exercise program that works for you.
- ✔ **Learn to identify and manage triggers and cravings.** If you're like most sugar addicts, you've learned to reach for something sweet under certain circumstances, like when you feel stressed, lonely, hungry, or tired.

To successfully reduce your sugar intake, you need to recognize these external triggers and practice making more conscious (and sensible) decisions when they present themselves. Chapter 9 — the most important chapter in this book, in my opinion — helps you determine what you really want when a craving hits.

- ✓ **Don't give up when you fall off the wagon.** People often get discouraged when they have a bad eating day, week, or month. Keep in mind that success is a series of ongoing decisions, and it's never too late to start making better ones, no matter how many poor decisions you've made in a row so far. All you have to work with is what you choose to do *right now*, so don't beat yourself up about the fact that you've been less than perfect in the past. Check out Chapter 8 for an introduction to mindfulness and avoiding reactive behavior.

Eating Right and Creating a New Normal

The reason diets don't work is that they don't lay out a realistic, sustainable plan that you can use to replace how you've been feeding yourself. Eating right doesn't require completely eliminating any one type of food (even sugar!) or some "revolutionary" new system of nutrition that has just been uncovered by scientists from another planet and is now available to you for only five easy payments of \$49.95.



Eating well and losing weight requires a series of small, ongoing decisions that replace what you used to do most of the time. Aristotle said, in a nutshell, that we are what we repeatedly do, and excellence is therefore not a trait but a habit.

When you change what you usually do — that is, what's normal for you (see Chapter 9) — you get different results. No temporary diet can create a new normal for you; you must create one yourself by making different decisions most of the time.

Simplifying the low-carb concept

Low-carb eating is all about controlling your insulin levels. *Insulin* is a hormone that causes your cells to take up the glucose (sugar) that goes into the blood when you digest carbohydrates. Eating too many carbohydrates (or the wrong kind of carbohydrates) forces your body to produce a lot of insulin. Chronically high insulin levels cause conditions like metabolic syndrome, diabetes, high cholesterol, and polycystic ovarian syndrome. High insulin levels also promote fat storage and limit fat burning for energy. The primary way to keep your

insulin levels low is to control your carbohydrate intake, both the type you choose and the amount you eat. Check out Chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion on types of carbohydrates and insulin control.

Carbohydrates are all broken down in your digestive system into simple sugars, but that doesn't mean that all carbohydrates are bad. Carbohydrates that break down faster raise your blood sugar levels more than carbs with a slower breakdown and release, and when it comes to blood sugar, slower is better. High blood sugar levels trigger a large insulin release, which causes fat storage and over time can cause diabetes and serious tissue damage.



To determine the effect that a particular carbohydrate has on your blood sugar, you can look up its *glycemic load* (see Chapter 5) to see how much a serving of that kind of carbohydrate raises your blood sugar levels.

High-fiber carbohydrates (like vegetables) generally have a lower glycemic load and therefore raise your blood sugar levels less than sugar (like candy or soda) or starchy carbs (like bread or pasta). Choosing vegetables over sugar or grains is a good way to start controlling your blood sugar levels, and adding protein and fat to the mix drastically slows the rise of blood sugar from the carbs in that meal.

Improving your eating with five easy habits

Chapter 5 is all about putting together a healthy nutrition system for yourself. Here are some tips to get you started:

- ✓ Eating a high-protein breakfast stimulates your metabolism, stabilizes your blood sugar, and keeps your energy levels high throughout the morning. An all-carb continental breakfast promotes fat storage and puts you on the blood sugar roller coaster for the rest of the day. See Chapter 13 for energy-boosting breakfast ideas.
- ✓ Vegetables should make up the majority of your carbohydrate intake (see Chapter 5). Vegetables are low in calories and high in vitamins, minerals, fiber, and phytonutrients, so they make the ideal carbohydrate choice. Fruits are high in nutrients, but they also contain more sugar, so be judicious in your portions.
- ✓ Try to eat a protein source every time you eat. Protein is essential for rebuilding muscles and organs and for making immune system cells, hormones, enzymes, and a host of other necessary components of a healthy physiology. Eating protein with carbohydrates slows down the release

of sugar into the bloodstream, so getting enough protein is important for blood sugar control too. Protein helps keep your appetite at bay longer than carbohydrates do.

- ✓ Drinking enough water is important to keep all your body's tissues healthy, including your brain. Being dehydrated decreases your mental and physical functions and triggers your hypothalamus to turn on the hunger and thirst centers in your brain, increasing appetite and cravings. A general guideline is to aim to drink a minimum of 64 ounces of water every day.
- ✓ Using the right nutrition supplements is a good way to ensure that you supply your body with optimum nutrition. Nutrition deficiencies can cause food cravings and contribute to a host of degenerative diseases like arthritis, heart disease, and cancer. Chapter 5 explains which nutrition supplements may be helpful under certain circumstances.

Change your thinking, change your life

Overcoming your sugar addiction requires different behaviors and new ways of thinking. You need to not only improve your nutrition plan but also train yourself to make proactive, conscious decisions instead of acting reactively to stress.

Learning to be mindful and intentional instead of being reactive is a crucial component of controlling your eating and managing the stress in your life. Your diet starts with your brain, not with your mouth, so go through Chapters 8 and 9 to begin changing your life by changing your thinking.

Figuring Out What You Really Need Instead of Sugar

If you're like most addicts, you use sugar to medicate yourself. Sugar is a substitute for something that's missing in your life. To stop the cravings and heal your addiction, you have to figure out what emotional "hole" you're trying to fill with sugar.

The next time you have a craving for something sweet, stop to figure out what it is that you really want — chances are it's not sugar. Here are some examples:

- ✔ If you have the urge to grab something sweet when you get stressed, what you probably want is to feel peaceful and in control of your life. Sugar can't give you that.
- ✔ If you're ravenous when you get home at night and are ready to grab whatever you can stuff yourself with the fastest, what your body really wants is nourishment. Sugar can't give you that.
- ✔ When you desire sugar because you feel lonely, sad, or hopeless, what you probably want is companionship, hope, and joy. Sugar can't give you that.

After you start to recognize what your real motivations are, you can start taking steps to achieve those states instead of drugging yourself with sugar. Chapter 9 takes you through the process in more detail.