The Relationship Between IBS and Sugar

by EMMI SCOTT

IBS and Sugar

When looking for dietary solutions for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), some people choose to cut out foods like gluten, dairy and soy. However, one major irritant that they overlook is sugar. So, how are and IBS and sugar connected?

Many people do not realize the impact that sugar has on the digestive system. Overeating sugar can lead to cramping and diarrhea. Plus, some people with IBS may also have a sugar intolerance.

How the Body Processes Sugar

The digestion of sugar starts in the mouth and continues through the digestive system to the small intestine.

Digestive enzymes split disaccharides, a combination of two simple sugars, apart. Once they have been separated, the small intestine absorbs the sugars.

They then pass through into the bloodstream to be metabolized and used for energy and are also sent to the liver for further processing.

What Happens When We Eat Too Much Sugar?

While sugar is an important form of energy, too much of it can have negative effects on the body.

Too much sugar in your bloodstream can cause thirst, nausea, dizziness and headaches. High blood sugar also stimulates your appetite and may cause you to overeat, leading to weight gain.

The body also stores excess sugar as fat to be used as a future energy source.

Consuming too much sugar can lead to inflammation. This can cause joint pain, as well as speed up the aging of your skin.

It can also cause problems with your heart, liver, kidneys and pancreas.

Eating excess amounts of sugar can be addictive, as it causes the brain to release dopamine. However, the brain will need an increasing amount of sugar to have the same effect over time.

Digestive Problems Caused by Sugar

In addition to the other problems caused by overeating sugar, the digestive system can be affected as well.

When we have overeaten sugar, the small intestine cannot absorb all of it and pass it into the bloodstream.

Instead, the excess sugar travels to the large intestine. The bacteria in the large bowel begins to feast on the sugar, leading to fermentation. The fermentation of the sugars produces gas, leading to bloating, abdominal pain and feelings of distention.

Additionally, when excess sugar travels to the large intestine, it brings extra water with it. This can lead to diarrhea.

These are all common symptoms of IBS. Overeating sugar can cause them even after making other diet and lifestyle changes.

How Much is Too Much?

To avoid problems caused by overconsumption of sugar, it is important to know how much sugar is safe to consume.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services makes a distinction between natural and added sugars.

Natural and Added Sugars

Natural sugars are found as fructose in fruit and as lactose in dairy products.

Sucrose is most often the source of added sugar. It is extracted from sugar cane and sugar beets and is refined and added to food and drinks to sweeten them.

While it is important not to over consume either natural or added sugars, the sources of natural sugar do contain essential nutrients.

The fiber in fruit helps you feel full and slows down the metabolism.

But added sugar is digested quickly, causing insulin and blood sugar levels to spike. Added sugar will not make you feel full, which may lead you to overeat it.

Recommended Consumption

The Department of Health and Human Services recommends that less than 10% of daily calories come from added sugar.

If you eat a diet of 1,800 calories a day, only 180 or fewer calories should come from added sugar. That is the same as 45 grams or 11 teaspoons of sugar.

Sugar Intolerance

In addition to common issues with sugar, some people with IBS may also have a sugar intolerance.

Your body may not have the enzymes needed to break down specific sugars, so that the small intestine can absorb them.

They then travel to the large intestine and are fermented by the bacteria there, leading to bloating and abdominal pain.

Lactose intolerance is the most popular sugar intolerance. Individuals who are lactose intolerant do not have lactase, the enzyme required to break down the sugars in dairy. Others may not have the digestive enzymes to

break down the sugars in legumes, onions, cabbage and wheat.

If you believe that you have an intolerance a sugar intolerance and are thinking about a dietary change, you may want to consult your doctor or nutritionist for guidance.

How to Avoid Eating Too Much Sugar

Since so many IBS symptoms can be caused by overeating sugar, it is important to pay attention to your sugar intake.

To avoid overeating sugar, you can:

- **Decrease your consumption of sugary foods.** In particular, you can avoid drinking sugar-filled beverages like soda, fruit drinks, energy drinks and alcoholic beverages. Almost half of the added sugar that Americans consume comes from beverages.
- **Read food labels.** This will help you learn which packaged foods contain more sugar. Sometimes, just one food item can include more grams of sugar than the daily recommended limit.
- **Track your daily sugar intake.** Keep a running total of how much sugar you consume throughout the day on your phone or a small notebook. This will help you make informed decisions about which foods to include in your daily diet. It may also help you identify sugar cravings at certain times of the day.

Fortunately, by monitoring your sugar intake, you can eat an appropriate amount. That way, your body will get the energy it needs without leading to the IBS pain.