

Sugar named the world's most popular drug

Tasty treats: By Year 6, one in five children are obese, according to official figures.

Should sugar be treated like a drug? A new study shows that seasonal lattes and hot chocolates being sold by some high street coffee chains can contain up to 23 spoonfuls of sugar per cup.

It changes our mood. It creates a pleasurable short-term sensation. And once we get used to it, we want more.

These statements are all true of alcohol, nicotine and cannabis. But they could also refer to something most people take — and give to their children — every day: sugar.

Now, our addiction to the sweet treat is under scrutiny again. Christmassy drinks at all the popular, international coffee chains have been found to contain huge quantities of sugar.

And research by Public Health England has revealed that children in the UK are eating roughly double the **recommended** daily allowance of it each day.

The study found that by age 10, the average child has consumed 18 years' worth of sugar. "Children are consuming too much sugar, but parents can take action now," said nutritionist Alison Tedstone.

Scientists are divided on whether sugar is addictive. But like nicotine, heroin and cocaine, it is purified to concentrate its effects. It also stimulates the release of dopamine (a hormone commonly associated with the brain's pleasure system and **withdrawal** symptoms). And it has become easier to transport and refine it since

it was discovered in the **tropics** centuries ago. As its price fell, consumption rose quickly.

It is now not only present in chocolate bars and fizzy drinks, but in many tinned and canned products. Since the 1980s, it has become a common ingredient in snacks branded as **healthy**. “Sugar has become [...] so ubiquitous, it can only be avoided by concerted and determined effort,” Gary Taubes wrote in *The Guardian*.

But sugar is associated with many health problems — particularly obesity, diabetes and associated **illnesses**. This has led to growing calls for tougher action on sugary food and drinks.

In 2017, the UK Government introduced a sugar **tax** on the soft drinks industry. The World Health Organisation has called on others to follow suit. This, in turn, has inspired a backlash: in Colombia, for example, an anti-sugar broadcast was banned at the sugar industry’s behest.

So, is sugar a drug? And should it be regulated as such — for example, by restricting its sale to children?

Sweet poison?

Absolutely, say health campaigners. Sugar is addictive and harmful, just like substances we usually call “drugs”. It may be legal and socially acceptable to wolf down a cake, but that does not make it any better for us. The Government should get tougher to protect people, particularly the young, from “the white killer”.

Ridiculous, cry sugar enthusiasts. We do not inject, snort or smoke sugar. Its impact on our behaviour is relatively minor. Small amounts of sugar in our diet can be beneficial, provided we exercise regularly. And our bodies convert carbohydrates to glucose: a substance which occurs naturally in the human body is hardly a drug.

YOU DECIDE

1. Would you eat less sugar if it cost more?
2. Is sugar a drug?

ACTIVITIES

1. Keep a diary of everything you eat and drink for a week. Work out how much sugar you have consumed. Then discuss what you have learnt as a class.
2. Think of a meal you like eating and then write a recipe for a sugar-free equivalent. Try cooking it and eating it. Report to the class on what you thought.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Sugar is the sociopath of foods. It acts sweet but really it’s poison.”

Karen Salmansohn, US self-help writer

What do you think?

Q & A

What do we know?

Your diet has an important impact on your health — which, in turn, affects how long you live and the quality of your life. If you eat too much sugar, you will be more likely to become ill in later life. And it could lead to short-term problems too, for example, by making you more irritable. But you may also feel it is important to make your own decisions and take responsibility for the food you eat — rather than being told what to do by powerful people.

What do we not know?

Whether sugar will be regulated more in the future. The way we talk about substances like this affects the rules around them. So if sugar is considered a “drug”, it would give the Government and regulators more power to restrict its use. That would mean it could become harder to get hold of sugar.

WORD WATCH

Recommended

Official health guidelines suggest four to six-year-olds should eat no more than five cubes of sugar per day; seven to 10-year-olds no more than six.

Withdrawal

The rush of dopamine creates an enjoyable immediate sensation. But, in the long term, it trains our brain to require more of the substance that created it, meaning naturally enjoyable activities give us less pleasure.

Tropics

The first known record of sugar’s presence in England dates to 1099, when the Crusaders returned from the Middle East with “a new spice”. Large amounts of sugar were later produced in areas such as the West Indies.

Healthy

Manufacturers have commonly replaced fats with sugars in food and drink products such as “heart-healthy snacks” and “health food bars”.

Illnesses

Both obesity and diabetes make people more susceptible to ailments such as cancer and heart disease.

Tax

George Osborne announced this measure as Chancellor in March 2016. But after Theresa May became Prime Minister, the Government diluted plans to crack down on junk food advertising and product placement in supermarkets.