

Ask the Pediatrician: Especially this time of year, all my kids want to eat is sweets. What should I do?

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"Can I have a treat?"

"I want candy!"

Sound familiar?

Many kids may still have a stash of Halloween candy, and soon other holiday treats may be filling the house.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends [children](#) (and parents) limit added [sugar](#) to less than 10% of their daily calories. However, the average American diet is so high in sugar that kids can easily exceed that limit many times over without realizing it.

On average, Americans get about 13% of their total calories from added sugars. Meanwhile, children and young adults between ages 2 to 19 years consume a whopping 17 teaspoons of added sugar each day, on average. And taking in excess sugar can fuel cravings for even more sweet foods or drinks.

Are you ready to break the cycle of excess sugar for your family?

You can start by making some simple changes over time. Here are six tips to tame your child's sweet tooth in a world of sugary treats.

1. Take stock of sugar

To learn how much added sugar is in food, look at the label. Nutrition labels now make it easier to track how much added sugars are in packaged foods and beverages.

The nutrition label on foods display total sugars. This includes natural sugars, like those found in an apple, and added sugars used to enhance the flavor of foods. Added sugars include sucrose and dextrose (often

added in food processing), and sweeteners that are packaged as stand-alone products like honey, table sugar and syrups.

The label also breaks out how much added sugars a product contains, often in grams. (Four grams equals one teaspoon.) It also provides context with USDA [dietary guidelines](#), which limit added sugars to no more than 50 grams in a 2,000-calorie daily diet.

So if a product contains 25 grams of sugar, it would list 50% on the label. Products are considered low in added sugars if the daily value is 5% or less, and high in added sugars if it is 20% or more.

2. Learn to spot 'sneaky' sugar

Many foods marketed as "health foods" can actually have a lot of added sugar. Always check the labels on [sports drinks](#), smoothies, protein and granola bars and yogurt; some can have as much as four to five teaspoons of added sugar per serving. Whole fruit makes a great substitute for these and can count for dessert, too. If your kids balk at first (and they will), melt some [dark chocolate](#) and let your kids dip—what kid doesn't love to dip? Dark chocolate actually contains 70% cocoa and has less than half the sugar of milk chocolate.

3. Keep beverages simple

Stick with milk and water as your child's main beverages. While 100% [fruit juice](#) can be an acceptable part of a healthy diet, offer it in age-appropriate moderation. That means no juice for children under 12 months of age, no more than four ounces per day for 1- to 3-year-olds, and only four to six ounces for 4- to 6-year-olds.

Know that it can be challenging to limit sweet beverages once kids get used them, though. Offer alternatives to juice by placing sliced fruit into

water to give it some flavor without the excess sugar. Also, avoid letting your child sip on juice (or any other sugar-containing liquid, for that matter) for long periods. Whether by bottle, sippy cup, box or cup, bathing the teeth in sugary liquids can cause serious tooth decay.

4. Avoid rewards with sugar

Whether it's at home, in the classroom or on the sports field, far too often kids are rewarded for good behavior with sugary treats. In the quest to coax kids to eat better, parents may reward "one more bite of peas" with a sweet treat. While this kind of reward may work in the short term, it becomes a problem when children learn to expect it for appropriate behavior.

5. Change the culture

Far too often, we celebrate holidays, birthdays and other special occasions with sweets. This makes it hard to avoid them. However, kids value other "treats" just as much as sugary ones. With some creativity, many of the sugary celebrations can be reinvented with new, healthier traditions.

Talk to your child's teachers, coaches, scoutmasters and other parents to come up with ways to celebrate with more fun and less sugar. If your child's sports team provides sweet treats after games, for example, suggest [whole fruit](#) as a healthier alternative. In addition, plain water is the best drink for most children engaging in routine physical activity. As the AAP clinical report on the subject explains, kids should not consume energy drinks and rarely need sports drinks.

6. Find balance

We may like our [kids](#) to stay away from sugary treats as much as

possible, but we also want them to learn an important skill: how to balance all the available choices when they are able to make food decisions for themselves. Keeping sugary treats under lock and key—or banning them all together—may also fuel an unhealthy craving for sugar. Show your children that an occasional dessert or sweet treat can be part of a balanced diet; model that behavior yourself! Sweets and snacks in appropriate portions are OK in moderation.

By being educated about sugar intake and making the occasional sugary treat a part of your family's culture, you may find your children craving sugary treats and snacks less and enjoying them in a more mindful and balanced way for life.

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