

On nutrition: Why kids love sweets

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My nine-year-old grandson recently told me the bits of spinach in my tortellini soup were his "worst nightmare." A bit over-dramatic, don't you think?

This same kid has no problem downing any sweet treat that comes his

way, however.

Why do kids have such a strong preference for sweets? We are born with it, say experts. It's this initial taste for sugar that may drive us to seek our first [food](#). Human milk is high in the natural sugar, lactose—an easily digested source of energy that also promotes the growth of beneficial bacteria in an infant's gut, according to a 2019 consensus article on lactose in the journal *Nutrients*.

American children aren't the only ones who love sweets. A 2021 article in the *Journal of Sensory Studies* states that a child's "heightened preference for sweetness is universal across cultures."

Granted, these kids are growing fast and need extra calories. Nutritionally though, the amount of sugar most kids consume has clearly crossed the line. Starting at age two, kids and adults alike are called to eat no more than 10% of our daily calories from sugar, according to the current dietary guidelines for Americans. They are currently well above that limit.

A "moderate" intake of added [sugar](#) for my active nine-year-old grandson, for example, is no more than about 160 calories from sweets each day. That computes to about 1/4 cup of Skittles ... and not in the place of more nutritious foods.

How do we do that without being overly restrictive, which can often backfire into worse habits? A 2020 [research article](#) in *Obesity Science & Practice* found some strategies that may help.

This family-based study reported that when moderate amounts of candy were made available in the home and children were also taught to "savor the flavor" and be more mindful about eating these foods, the kids actually ate less of them. Oh, and parents also had to stop using candy as

a reward.

Mindful eating takes time and that's the point. Try this when kids come in ready to devour a bag of Halloween candy: Take one piece. Slowly unwrap it. Smell it. Suck on it for 10 seconds or take a small bite and enjoy the taste. Eat it slowly and think about how yummy each bite tastes.

Kids need to experience a wide variety of foods (even spinach) in their formative years. Not to put on the pressure, but experts say our adult preferences are shaped by the experiences we had as children.

As my grandfather used to say, too much of anything, including Halloween candy, is not good for you. Our goal, then, is to help our kids develop a healthy respect for food and to learn to eat goodies in moderation.

Barbara Intermill is a registered dietitian nutritionist and syndicated columnist.

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