**Are Hidden Sugars Hurting Your Health?**

**By Dr. Ramona Warren**

When I work with patients, one of the first steps I suggest to improve health is to reduce overall sugar consumption. Oftentimes, when I mention this to people, they will respond by saying, “I don’t eat sugar.” What they are really trying to say is they are not eating candy bars, ice cream, cookies or desserts -- which is a great start! However, there are many ways we consume sugar without realizing it, and it’s these hidden sugars that can have a detrimental effect on our health.

Recently, I was treating a young man in his late 20s who was complaining of joint pain. He also suffered with a lot of stomach pain, bloating, gas and fatigue. He was slim and athletic and said he ate healthy. When I asked what he ate for breakfast, he explained that he typically had a Starbucks Caramel Latte and two yogurt parfaits with granola. He, like many other people, felt the yogurt was a healthy choice. However, according to the nutritional data of these items, the caramel coffee has 52 grams of sugar and each yogurt parfait has 31 grams, bringing his total sugar consumption to 114 grams – or 28 teaspoons of sugar! And that was before his day really got underway! Fortunately, this young man is now making healthier choices and has experienced dramatic improvement in his joint pain and digestive complaints as a result.

Most people are aware that eating too much sugar increases cavities, obesity and the risk for diabetes, but sugar consumption can also cause:

* Weakened immune system (the immune system is suppressed within 10 minutes after eating sugar and will remain suppressed for several hours)
* Fatigue
* Anxiety and Panic attacks
* PMS
* Hyperactivity
* Fatty liver

Additionally, sugar can cause brain inflammation that can impair memory. A recent study in the journal *Neurology* showed that elevated blood sugar levels impaired both memory and learning ability. Higher blood sugar levels also weaken the blood vessels in the brain, decreasing blood flow and nutrients to the blood cells, which can eventually lead to the brain shrinking in size.

In order to reduce your sugar consumption, you must read labels. If the first few ingredients include some form of sugar, then the product will probably be high in total sugars. Some of the “hidden” names for sugar are: corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, fruit juice concentrate, cane juice, cane syrup, malt syrup, maple syrup, maltodextrin, molasses, agave nectar, honey, dextrose, maltose, sucrose. Any ingredient ending in “ose” is typically a form of sugar.

You can find the total sugars of a food listed in grams under the “carbohydrate” portion of the label. Four grams of sugar equals one teaspoon. It’s also helpful to look at the amount of fiber. Usually the more fiber the better. Fiber has many benefits, and helps to slow down the impact of sugar in the body. However, the most important thing to remember when reading labels is to look for the FEWEST ingredients. The fewer the ingredients, the closer the food usually is to its natural state.

What about sugar substitutes such as Equal or Splenda? These are inventions by the food industry and not something the body knows how to process. Equal is aspartame, which is a neurotoxin and can lead to the death of brain cells. What’s worse, studies have shown consuming aspartame can actually INCREASE cravings for carbohydrates. Another study showed drinking just one **diet** soda a day led to weight gain. Some of the medical conditions associated with consuming aspartame include:

* Memory problems
* Fatigue
* Weight gain
* Anxiety
* Depression
* Fibromyalgia
* Multiple sclerosis
* Hearing loss
* Brain tumors

Splenda, or sucralose, isn’t much better. Although marketed as a “natural” sweetener, Splenda is chlorinated sugar and is toxic to the body, especially the liver and kidneys. It also destroys the good bacteria in the gut, which weakens the immune system.

The good news is there are a few good sugar alternatives such as stevia, which is an herb that does not impact blood sugar and has zero calories. It has been used for hundreds of years in Europe and Brazil. It can be used in hot or cold foods, and can be used for cooking. Another choice is xylitol, which is a white powdered sweetener and is even used to help prevent tooth decay. Raw honey is another option with many health benefits, but should be consumed cautiously since it will impact blood sugar levels.