



How to Get Over Your Sugar Addiction

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I'm a lifelong sweet tooth (AKA sugar addict). I can't finish a meal without something sweet to top it off. My stomach even has this neat "reserve tank" purely for sweets. Cool, eh? I could be completely full after a meal yet have plenty of room for an 800 calorie dessert. My palate isn't discriminating either, it loves real sugar and fake sugar, you name it, anything sweet will do. The gravity of my addiction came last year when I ordered my medium coffee at Dunkin Donuts with five Splenda. The lady behind me yelled loud enough for all 10 people in line to hear, "FIVE SPLENDAS!? WHO PUTS THAT MUCH IN?!" The sad part is if I was using real sugar, it would have been more like...umm... 8 or 9. (Half the audience is shaking their heads right now—the other half *totally gets me.*)

The good news is that I'm in recovery. Like any addiction, sugar addiction can be overcome. Unlike a drug addiction, you don't have to give sugar up entirely (whew!). The amount of sugar we crave has been conditioned by the food industry, our early family experiences, and our current food choices. In terms of the food industry, larger quantities of sugar have been added to products over the years. Even if your diet has not changed in 20 years, you are undoubtedly eating MORE sugar, which means you are probably preferring things sweeter without even realizing it. The food companies know this, they figure if they can get you "hooked" on their product by adding tons of sugar (more than the competitor) you will be a loyal customer. Tony the Tiger, my friend, is a drug lord (gasps). Your early family experiences matter too. Think of the foods available to you as a child. Like a lot of families back in the day, we ate dessert after dinner pretty regularly, maybe that is why I crave it so much now. Your current eating habits are heavily influenced by those experiences... and of course, Tony.

Just as our palates have been conditioned to crave sugar, they can be conditioned to crave it less. The process is pretty straightforward. If you repeatedly eat a food, your preference and craving will increase even if you didn't like that food in the first place. This is how we have gotten into trouble with sugar—we have created *too much* of an appetite for it. To like a food *less*, we have to work this process in reverse. The key is to train your palette to prefer less sweet. **Notice I said "sweet" and not "sugar." Noncaloric sweeteners are sweet too, sometimes even sweeter than sugar. Your tongue, and possibly your brain, do not know the difference. Using these instead of sugar will NOT reduce your sugar addiction, it will only feed it. Damn you Splenda, I thought you were my FRIEND!**

Think of the parts of your diet that include sweet things. Beverages? Snacks? Desserts? Here are a few ways you can begin to condition your palette to prefer LESS sweet.

1. The Coffee Experiment. If, like me, you put loads of sugar in your coffee (or tea) everyday, you can use this as an opportunity to begin to train your palate to prefer LESS. How many packets or teaspoons of sugar/sweetener do you use? Subtract one. The coffee won't taste quite as sweet but continue to drink it this way for 2-3 weeks, or until you get used to it. Once you are comfortably used to this level of sweetness, cut back by one more, and just keep repeating the process until you have at least halved the sweetener. The key here is to not cut more until you are very comfortable with the current level of sweetness. I am happy to report that I'm down to 2 packets. Taking a sip from coffee with 5 packets now seems way too sweet for me. It took me a while but I got there. Some people prefer to go cold turkey and get rid of all of the sweetener at once. If you can do this—great, but for many people it will be unpleasant which will drive them back to the previous amount. I suggest the gradual approach but the extreme approach will also work only if you can stick to it.



2. Liquify your Sodas. By always drinking beverages that taste sweet, we end up finding water and other unsweetened beverages less satisfying. If you drink 5 sodas per day (diet or real sugar) replace one with water or nonsweetened seltzer (no artificial sweetener). In 2 weeks, replace another soda with water or nonsweet seltzer. Keep doing this until you have completely shifted. If you drink non-carbonated beverages like juice, Crystal Light, or lemonade, I suggest diluting by adding more water than you typically would. Gradually increase the water to drink mix ratio to wean yourself off of the sweet.

3. Snack Swap. The same concept applies for sweet snacks. Figure out how many grams of sugar are in your typical snack (yogurt, granola bar, etc). Find similar options that have fewer grams of sugar. For example, a Kashi granola bar has less sugar than Quaker. Again, beware of artificial sweeteners in lower sugar versions (e.g., yogurt). These may actually taste even SWEETER than real sugar versions even though they have fewer grams of sugar. This will INCREASE your desire for sweet not reduce it. You might also begin to include some snacks that are not sweet at all (almonds, cheese, hummus) so that you can untrain yourself from expecting sweet at snack times.

4. Happy Hour. Oh how I love a fruity cocktail on a hot day! The cocktail is another area of our consumption that has trained us to prefer sweet, especially because we often want to mask the strong taste of liquor. Avoid cocktail mixes (e.g., sour mix, margarita mix, etc) and instead use fresh fruit (squeezed or muddled) to mix in with no added sugar. You will get the natural fruit flavor but with less intense sweetness. By being less sweet, you will drink more slowly and probably drink less.

5. Don't Have Your Cake And Eat it Too...Much. Ahhh..desserts. I suspect many of you relate to the need to have something sweet after a meal. Reduce the number of days that you have something sweet after a meal so that your body stops expecting it so much. For example, if you are used to a sweet after dinner 5 days a week, then reduce to 4, then 3, and over time just do it on special occasions. Choose lower sugar desserts too. Also, it is important to undo the habit of ordering desserts in a restaurant every time you go. Do this only on occasion. Restaurant desserts are packed with sugar and calories.

6. Who Put Sugar in my Bread? There is a scene in the movie, The Breakfast Club where Ally Sheedy takes the lunchmeat out of her sandwich and then empties pixie sticks onto the bread after sprinkling it with Cap N Crunch. Even a sugar addict like me feels like this is going too far! Sugar in a sandwich?! Blech! For some reason bread companies have attached themselves to this idea because they empty pixie sticks into their bread dough. Many breads are made with an astonishing amount of high fructose corn syrup or other forms of sugar. In the nutrition information, look at the grams of sugar across various brands of bread and select one that is low. Check the sugar content of other foods that aren't really supposed to be sweet. Choose brands that do NOT add sugar or artificial sweeteners.

As you can see, the deconditioning process is the same regardless of the food category. The idea is to slowly and methodically reduce the amount of sugar or sweetener in the foods that you eat. As you reduce, you will notice your palette changing. If you worry that you will end up doomed to a bland diet, don't! Remember, you are doing this slowly which means that you will gradually come to **prefer** less sugar. Kellogg's may have created your sweet tooth, but you can be the one to undo it.