

Mum's the word

This month our columnist looks at the sticky issue of sugar...



According to David Gillespie, author of the best-selling 'Sweet Poison' books and father of six young children, while sugar is now banned from his house, he is realistic about it. "You cannot stop children going to birthday parties [as] that would turn them into weirdos... So they're going to eat sugar at parties. But we have dramatically reduced the amount of sugar in their lives."

Keen to learn more, I invested in the book, 'I Quit Sugar', by Rachel Wilson, which promises 108 recipes which make quitting sugar 'fun'. Dubiously I flicked through it to see what dramatic changes we could make. The sugar-free Nutella looked promising, although I didn't hold out much hope in finding all the ingredients – rice malt syrup, anyone? And I had grave doubts about the Pumpkin Pie Porridge considering I can't persuade my children to eat either pumpkin OR porridge.

Turns out Mary Poppins had it all wrong. A spoonful of sugar doesn't help the medicine go down, in fact it makes us sick, fat and disease-ridden. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the stuff is killing us and we're eating way too much of it, clocking up some 1.5lbs per person per week – yes, you read that correctly.

You can't get away from sugar these days, even if you don't add it to your cup of tea or sprinkle it on your Weetabix; it's added to just about everything, from a slice of bread to a jar of pasta sauce. I like to think we are relatively health conscious in our house and I do try to avoid buying the obvious suspects such as sweets and chocolates, opting instead for yoghurt's, muesli bars and apples, but if the science is anything to go by, this doesn't go half way to solving the problem.

In the past I've tried very hard to convince the children to swap their morning bowl of Cheerios for a nice healthy bowl of muesli topped with fruit yoghurt, but according to the figures I needn't have bothered. A bowl of muesli can contain as many as eight teaspoons

of sugar, whereas the Cheerios contain five, and that's before we've added the fruit yoghurt which is also laden with a scary five teaspoons of the white stuff.

Ditto the healthy smoothie v the demon can of coke. A 250ml bottle of Innocent smoothie clocks up a whopping six and a half spoons compared to seven in a can of coke! Obviously if you're going to make the choice, the smoothie is the better option due to the vitamins and minerals it contains, but if we are to follow the new guidelines being laid down by the WHO – which recommends we halve our sugar intake to five spoons a day (20g) – your morning glass of fresh orange juice can push you over your daily limit before you've even reached the front door.

So what is a modern parent to do? Do we ban all fruit juices and cordials and give them a glass of water instead? Do we banish the peanut butter sandwich from their lunch boxes (four teaspoons) and give them carrot sticks and pureed spinach instead (my children would move out if I tried that)? Are birthday parties now deemed the work of the devil to be avoided at all costs?

Undeterred, I turned to the Lunchbox Ideas section hoping for some realistic alternatives to their strawberry milk and chocolate brioche. And although there were several ideas which I might like to try myself – apple and peanut butter sandwiches (without bread) - I couldn't see my children agreeing to eat any one of them, least of all the suggestion to pack hard-boiled eggs in their lunchbox (really, have these been tried out on actual children? I have my doubts).

What is clear is that if we stand a chance of reducing our sugar intake, it will take a complete overhaul of our attitude towards food, shopping and cooking, and a return to simple ingredients and home cooking. Of course, this is easier said than done in these busy times, unless of course you can afford a full-time cook or better still a nanny to do it for you.

Just make sure her name's not Mary Poppins, I've heard she's rather keen on sugar...

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