

## Resisting Sweet Temptation

### Get your hand out of the cookie jar!

By Karen Collins, MS, RD, CDN

Chocolate, bakery, soft drinks and other sweets are available around the clock. Their constant availability can make eating moderate amounts of them difficult. Although complete avoidance of sweets is unnecessary for good health, the calories in sweets add up quickly, making weight control more difficult. Sweets can also replace nutritious foods that have vitamins, fiber, phytochemicals and other substances vital to our well-being.

Part of the problem with sweets is that setting reasonable limits can be confusing. Some experts suggest that no more than ten percent of our calories should come from added sugars. Added sugars means sweeteners like table sugar, high fructose corn syrup and honey, not the natural sugars in fruits and milk, for example.

According to these experts, a reasonable amount of added sugars would vary with a person's calorie needs. Adults who are sedentary or trying to lose weight might limit themselves to 160 to 180 calories of added sugar (40–45 grams) per day. This amount could be a 12-ounce regular soft drink or 2 cookies and a cup of ice cream, as long as few other sweetened foods, like jelly or sugary cereals were not eaten during the day. Moderately active people who want to maintain their weight, might have 200–240 calories of added sugar (50–60 grams). These people could enjoy a small candy bar and six small cookies, for instance, but sugar in a 12-ounce regular soft drink adds up quickly and leaves room for little else.

The latest food guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show another way to eat sweets in moderation. These guidelines lay out how many discretionary calories people have to use as they please, after meeting their nutritional needs with lowfat, low-sugar foods. While some people may want to eat high-fat foods or larger portions of nutrient-rich foods with their "extra" calories, others may choose to spend those calories on sweets. Depending on their calorie needs, a person could eat from 130 to 400 calories, or one to three servings of a sweet treat a day.

Coming up with a personal goal for eating sweets in moderation is only part of the problem. The bigger challenge is sticking with it. This necessarily involves making choices.

Studies show that one way to reduce the tempting power of sweets is to limit the variety of them around you. If ice cream or cookies are your weakness, stock your home with only one flavor at a time. If you have a great weakness for sweets, you might try keeping only one kind around. If you're eating out, avoid multi-dessert buffets where you're tempted to sample many kinds of desserts. Identify the sweets you enjoy most in life and stick to them.

Some people find that eating sweets only for dessert – never as snacks – makes it easier to limit them and decrease cravings. Sweets usually don't provide long-lasting fuel as snacks anyway. One study found that after two weeks of eating chocolate twice a day, 15 to 30 minutes after a meal, people who craved chocolate felt their desire for chocolate drop. But cravers and non-cravers who ate chocolate between meals felt their desire increase. Regularly eating chocolate or other sweets to satisfy hunger between meals may teach us to crave it.

Likewise, eating behavior experts say that using sweets to cope with disturbing emotions encourages us to depend on them. For this reason, it is best to learn how to manage stress without turning to food.

It is a pleasure to eat sweets, but in order to reduce excess calorie intake, we need to choose those that give us the most pleasure and eat them in moderation. Doing so will make room for nutritious foods that build good health: vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans.