

The Sugar Fast

Deleting sugar from her family's diet for a week seemed laughably easy. But as Andrea Tomkins discovered, the joke was on them

BY ANDREA TOMKINS

OCTOBER 21, 2010



Andrea Tomkins, her husband Mark, with Piper the dog, and her two daughters Emma, left, 11, and Sarah, 9, all sweet tooth fanatics, attempted a weeklong sugar fast.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

The idea to give up sugar for a week was practically a whim. My family has been participating in a year-long challenge called Know More Do More, an initiative that was spearheaded by the Champlain Cardiovascular Disease Prevention Network earlier this year. The idea behind KMDM is to empower parents and show them easy ways to take charge of their family's health.

We're one of two champion families who've pledged to pick a "tip" out of a special jar that was designed to inspire us to improve our activity levels and eating habits. It's like a magic 8-ball that tells us what we're going to be doing that week, whether it's making dinner together or exploring a new park.

Source: www.ottawacitizen.com/health/Sugar+Fast/3706310/story.html

My husband Mark and I decided to veer off the path and make up our own tip. We thought that a sugar fast might be a neat thing to try. It seemed laughably easy, but as it turned out, the joke was on us. When we pledged to go sugar-free for seven days we didn't realize it would be such a hard thing to do.

The basic idea was to get the whole family in the habit of reading labels and looking for hidden sugars, eating more mindfully, and really thinking about the food choices we make.

I expected that the amount of processed foods we consumed would drop and that there would be a few raging headaches at the beginning. I also expected that my kids, Emma and Sarah, wouldn't be keen participants. I was right, on all three counts.

My daughters, 9 and 11, were the main reason I wanted to try this experiment. Our collective sweet tooth has spun out of control. There's a sense of entitlement that wasn't there before. Chocolate and candy used to be considered a treat, but have been made cheap and plentiful. They're within arm's reach as we check out of the grocery store and packaged in appealing sizes for pockets and lunchboxes. Sweet treats have become an everyday food, not a sometimes food.

For the purposes of our sugar fast, "sugar-free" meant that we were avoiding sugar (brown and white), corn syrup, anything ending with -ose (like glucose and fructose), artificial sweeteners, maple syrup and honey. I'd also promised to cut Splenda out of my morning coffee. This was going to be a huge sacrifice for everyone involved, especially me.

It turned out to be a little more complicated than replacing after-dinner sweets with fruit and popcorn. It wasn't until I went grocery shopping that I realized how many of the foods we buy contain sugar.

Sugar is often referred to as the No. 1 food additive. It's in hundreds of packaged goods. Some are obvious (such as sweetened yogurt, cereal, pop, cookies, jam) and some are not (like salad dressing, bacon, bread, soup, and our daughter's beloved brand of peanut butter).

We've all become conspicuous consumers of sweet-tasting foods. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, per capita consumption of caloric sweeteners is on the rise. In 2000, each American consumed an average 152 pounds of caloric sweeteners. My feeling is we aren't too far off in Canada.

The USDA recommends that the average person on a 2,000-calorie daily diet include no more than 40 grams of added sugars. That's about 10 teaspoons, or the amount of sugar in a 12-ounce serving of pop.

I presented our family challenge on my blog (www.quietfish.com/notebook). The feedback was supporting and encouraging, but I sensed some eyeball-rolling among my readers, especially as it pertained to the types of sugars we were cutting out. Maple syrup was a big one. I realized it was practically sacrilegious, as a Canadian, to deny oneself the pleasure of maple syrup, the juice of our national tree, but Mark and I decided to drastically reduce the amount of sweetness no matter where it came from. This was our own challenge, so we made the rules as we saw fit.

The sugar fast was an enormous education tool and challenge, one that was much harder than I had expected.

I kept a daily log of our food and published it online. This was labour intensive and I worried about being judged. In terms of sugar consumption, I slipped up often. For example, I noticed that the organic vegetable broth I was using to make soup contained cane juice. Somehow I had missed it.

I cooked more meals from scratch. One night — having run out of steam — I grabbed a box of frozen battered fish at the grocery store. There was sugar in it. We were guests at my in-laws for dinner; I turned down a bottled Mott's Caesar and some barbecue-flavour potato chips. Sugar is everywhere.

The kids were dismayed that ketchup has sugar in it (thus forcing them to eat unadulterated meat) as did mayonnaise. Some bacon is sugar-cured. Tomato sauce has sugar in it too. Bread became a sore point with me. I spent more time in the bread aisle than anywhere else, finally managing to find a sourdough-type rye that had no added sugars in it.

I guess it seems obvious now, but almost everything that is factory made has sugar in it.

Fruit was our saviour. We ate many baskets of peaches. They were the perfect antidote for sugar cravings and we all benefited from the increase in fruit consumption. We also may not have survived without some homemade banana "ice cream" and two batches of sugar-free muffins.

The whole experience was exhausting, but I'm glad we did it. We learned a lot.

There were some surprises.

I hadn't told the girls what to do if they were offered sweets away from home. My youngest daughter was offered muffins in school on two occasions. She turned them down. And twice, both of my daughters were at a friend's house and were offered something sweet to eat. They turned it down too. (Politely, I hope). I was so proud of their resolve.

One of my daughter's school friends joined her in the last days of the sugar fast. She turned down muffins too, and asked her parents to pack sugar-free lunches.

I think kids are more than capable of going sugar-free, and also, they're smarter than we think. I think that was the best lesson of all.

Thinking of taking the Sugar Fast challenge?

Some tips for you and your family:

(1) Track everyone's food carefully. You'll get a much better perspective of what your family is eating. I didn't think we ate very much sugar and processed food, but it turns out we do!

(2) Leave an extra 20 minutes to get through the grocery store. Check every label, even the items you assume don't have sugar in them. Consider bringing the kids with you. The conversations that come from the experience are priceless. It is a huge learning experience for everyone.

(3) Home cooking is truly the way to go. Save yourself some stress and plan your meals ahead of time. Shopping at farmers' markets or the perimeter of the grocery store is a great way to avoid processed foods.

Banana 'ice cream'

1. Peel 3 or 4 very ripe bananas and break into 1-inch chunks. Toss into a container; freeze overnight.
2. Put frozen banana pieces into a blender.
3. Blend and serve. The consistency is amazingly similar to real ice cream.

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen