

Hooked for Life

How Weak Policies on Added Sugars Are Putting a Generation of Children at Risk

HIGHLIGHTS

Added sugars make up a significant proportion of Americans' diets and are associated with health risks including heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Weak federal nutrition policies have allowed added sugars to become ubiquitous in processed foods, even those meant for our nation's youngest generation.

To help improve individuals' quality of life and to secure the health of the nation, regulators and lawmakers must make a strong commitment to help prevent diet-related diseases in children, and the adults they will become, by limiting added sugars in foods and giving parents and caregivers as many tools as possible to raise a healthier next generation.

For decades, communities, public health professionals, and parents across the United States and the world have been fighting obesity and attendant illnesses. While various socioeconomic, behavioral, genetic, environmental, physical, and nutritional factors combine to determine an individual's health outcomes, overconsumption of high-calorie, low-nutrient diets including sugary foods and beverages is an important culprit in the obesity epidemic. Extensive and mounting research now shows that diets high in sugary foods and beverages are associated with increased risk of dental caries, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high cholesterol, and hypertension.

Children are especially at risk for developing preferences for sugary foods and beverages, beginning in utero as their brains and their taste and flavor preferences are forming. Early and repeated exposure to sweet foods and beverages shapes children's lifelong preferences for the sweet taste. Even as research continues to strengthen the evidence of the detrimental impacts of added sugar consumption on the young, food companies manufacture and aggressively market sugary baby foods, snacks, and drinks that influence children's tastes at a critical stage of development. Children of color and low-income children are put at particular risk, victims of a one-two punch of being targets of junk food marketing campaigns and having less access to healthy food options.

This report reviews the federal regulatory landscape for added sugars in food products manufactured for children from birth to five years. For infants, our focus is on complementary foods and beverages (not on breast milk or formula) that are



Excessive consumption of added sugars can lead to obesity, a condition that's likely to stay with a child as they progress into adulthood. Obesity is connected with a host of other health risks, including diabetes and heart disease.

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consumed beginning around age six months. We excluded school-aged children five and above because they often have access to nutritious foods through healthy school-breakfast and -lunch programs. We also summarize the inception of the baby food market and detail how the food industry has worked tirelessly to conceal information about added sugar and its detrimental health effects from the general public. Finally, we propose specific improvements that several stakeholders can make to protect children from an added sugar overload in their diets.

Key Findings

Our analysis shows that despite the overwhelming evidence linking sugar with negative health outcomes and recommendations to reduce added sugar intake by reputable scientific institutions such as the World Health Organization, the Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine), the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Heart Association, US federal policies and nutrition guidance fail to act fully on the best-available science on added sugar's health risks, which disproportionately affect infants and young children. The US government has made some recent progress in drawing attention to added sugars in foods. But it has also missed some key opportunities for requiring food companies to take measures that would avoid putting children's health at risk from excess sugar—as well as for adequately educating parents, and daycare providers and teachers about the high amounts of added sugars in children's food and beverages and its ill effects on health. Key findings include:

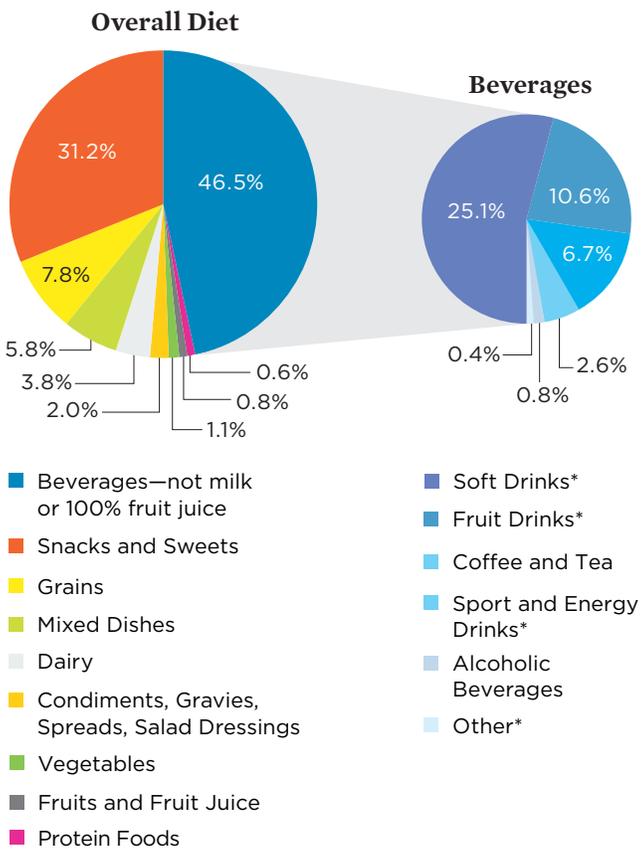
- The basis of nutrition advice in the United States, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, have thus far only been



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Babies and children have an inherent biological preference for sugar, and are attracted to bright colors and interesting shapes. Food companies take advantage of these preferences, loading foods with added sugar and marketing them directly to children.

FIGURE 1. Children Overconsume Added Sugars



Beverages account for half of sources of added sugars for ages two and up, while snacks and sweets make up about one-third.

* Sugar-sweetened beverages

Note: Values do not add up to 100% because baby foods, infant formulas, milk, and 100% fruit juices are excluded.

SOURCE: HHS AND USDA 2015

established for adults and children two years and older, leaving a gap in federal nutrition guidelines for infants from birth to two years.

- The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommendation of limiting added sugars to 10 percent of total daily calories could be lowered for young children for additional health benefits.
- The FDA requires a separate Nutrition Facts label for infants and children under four years old. This means that for nutrition labeling on most food packages does not distinguish between children and adults, listing serving sizes and daily reference values based on 2,000 to 2,500 calorie diets even though four-year-olds consume roughly the same amount of food as three-year-olds (1,000 to 1,400 calorie diets). Thus, it is likely that

four-year-olds are consuming foods, and the added sugars within them, at levels meant for adults.

- The FDA has certain disqualifying levels for saturated fat, total fat, cholesterol, and sodium, above which makers of a product may not make any health claims. Added sugar is notably absent from this category. Companies manufacturing foods intended for children may make nutrient and health claims for a food even if it contains high levels of added sugars.
- Federal supplemental food programs that serve participants under age five have not fully aligned nutritional guidelines with scientific advice. For example, as a part of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), yogurt may contain up to 40 grams (10 teaspoons) of sugars per cup. This means that even if WIC providers followed the guidelines, a three-year-old eating one cup would exceed the Dietary Guidelines' recommended 10 percent of calories from added sugars per day.
- Finally, the food industry wields oversized influence on federal rulemaking and its misinformation campaigns are especially problematic for children from birth to five years as their taste preferences are still developing; excessive consumption of added sugar sets them up for a lifetime of negative effects.

Key Recommendations

Many stakeholder groups have a role to play in addressing the epidemic of excessive added sugar consumption in children's diets. Listed below are some of the key recommendations presented in the report:

- **The US Department of Health and Human Services and the USDA.** Close the gap in nutrition advice for children from birth to two years of age by using the best-available science as the 2020 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* are developed with inclusion of this age group; consider lowering the limits on daily caloric intake from added sugars for children birth through five; and ensure transparency around conflicts of interest of members of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, requiring that the committee be constituted in a fully public process.
- **FDA.** Reduce the daily recommended limit for added sugars for four-year-olds to 25 grams from the current 50 grams; and designate a disqualifying level for added sugars, above which food products may not contain health, nutrient content, or structure/function claims.



FDA

After two years of rulemaking, the FDA finalized positive changes to the Nutrition Facts label in 2016, highlighting added sugar and revising serving sizes. Companies will be required to include the new label on all food packages by 2018. The new label lists total sugars and an indented line underneath for added sugars. The labels shown in this photo are the FDA's original proposed labels which are slightly different than the final label.

- **US Department of Agriculture.** Develop and actively implement a targeted education campaign for parents and child-care providers of infants and young children on how to reduce added-sugar consumption, rather than solely advising consumers to cut added sugar consumption; and revise WIC food packages to align with recommendations on added sugar in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* by increasing allowances for fresh fruits and vegetables and including the option for participants' use of vouchers for juice and jarred baby foods to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables instead.
- **National Academy of Medicine (formerly the Institute of Medicine).** In its current review of the integrity of the dietary guidelines process as mandated by Congress in 2015, encourage the maintenance of a robust process undertaken

by the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, one that is fully transparent, inclusive of public input, and free of committee member conflicts of interest. In addition, through its upcoming report on revisions to the WIC food packages, push for increased flexibility by increasing participants' voucher amounts for young children and allowing the substitution of fresh, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables for jarred baby food and juices.

- **Food and beverage manufacturers.** Serve as partners rather than foes of the public health community by reducing the amounts of sugar added to foods and drinks intended for young children; and strictly follow federal guidelines as well as voluntary commitments to not market junk foods to young children under age six.

In conclusion, the US government must shift the food policy paradigm toward one that is informed by science rather than industry pressure. Policies must protect public health, not corporate profits. Such science-informed policies and nutrition standards are needed to encourage parents and providers to limit children's added sugar intake and increase consumption of whole fruits and vegetables, lean protein, low-fat dairy, and whole grains. Together, policy makers and the food and beverage industry can take clearly defined steps to help parents and child-care providers feed America's children a healthier diet, one that gives children a better shot at good health throughout their lives.

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Union of Concerned Scientists

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