Dear Alice,

I realize dessert products labeled fat free are high in sugar (which can be converted into fat). But which is the lesser of the two evils: high fat or high sugar content?

? Sweet tooth

Answer

Dear Sweet tooth,

Unfortunately, the notion that "a calorie is a calorie" doesn't necessarily hold true. According to that sentiment, 100 calories of fresh strawberries would be equal to 100 calories of chocolate cake. More critical than the number of calories are the types of fat and sugar in a delectable dessert. So if you're making a choice between two desserts, both containing 300 calories, where one has most of its calories from fat, and the other from sugar, it is best to compare the types of fat and sugar in the two.

Trans fats are the most harmful. Trans fats are made by heating liquid vegetable oil in the presence of hydrogen gas, a process called hydrogenation. Hydrogenating vegetable oils makes them less likely to spoil and less likely to break down when heated and re-heated at high temperatures. Most of the trans fats come from commercially prepared baked goods, margarines, and processed foods, along with French fries and other fried foods prepared in fast food and other restaurants. Even small amounts of trans fat in the diet can have harmful health effects. Eating even a few calories from trans fats daily, the amount found in a medium order of French fries, raises one's risk for heart disease by 23 percent. Trans fats also cause more weight gain than other kinds of fats. In 2006, New York City became the first city to ban trans fats.

Saturated fats [2] are less harmful than trans fats. The body produces its own saturated fat so we don't need to eat it. Saturated fats come mainly from red meat, poultry, seafood, and dairy products (including cheese, milk, and ice cream). A few plants are also high in saturated fats, including coconuts. Saturated fats raise cholesterol [3] levels, both good cholesterol (HDL) and bad cholesterol (LDL). It's a good idea to keep your intake of saturated fats low, about seven percent or less of your caloric intake.

Unsaturated fats are the healthiest. They do not increase risk of heart disease and they raise levels of good cholesterol while lowering bad cholesterol. Unsaturated fats are predominantly
found in plant foods, such as vegetable oils, nuts, seeds, and avocados. Fish also contain unsaturated fats in the form of omega 3 fats. Unlike saturated fats, the human body does not produce its own unsaturated fat. Some research also indicates that unsaturated fats can lower your risk for certain cancers.

So what about sugars? There are many types of sugar, but only two main types of sugar to be concerned with health-wise: natural and added. Natural sugar is found in fruits, vegetables, milk, whole grain foods, yogurt, and most fruit juice. Too much added sugar can contribute to risk for heart disease (by increasing cholesterol), tooth decay, contributing to weight gain, and decreasing the amount of nutrient-rich calories that you consume. The American Heart Association has specific guidelines for added sugar: no more than 100 to 150 calories a day from added sugar, or no more than six to nine teaspoons. In the U.S., the average person consumes more than 22 teaspoons (or 355 calories) of added sugar a day. The biggest added-sugar culprit is soda and the second is sweets (candy and desserts). Cutting down on sodas and sweets is the best way to reduce added sugar, as well as checking out the labels on your cereals, syrups, jams, jellies, and other condiments.

Remember, the body needs sugar and fat to function, it just doesn't need as much as is typically found in the western diet. Paying attention to portion control—that is, the volume of dessert you put onto your plate—can help you manage your diet as well.

Stay sweet,

Alice!

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