

Sugar and spice, and all things nice?



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The number of people living with diabetes in the UK has tipped over the 4 million mark for the first time, according to new figures released at the beginning of the year by Diabetes UK (Diabetes UK, 2016). The new figures, extracted from GP patient data (Quality and Outcomes Framework, 2014–2015) show that there are now 4.05 million people with the condition in the UK, which includes 3.5 million adults who have been diagnosed. This is an increase of 119 965 compared to the previous year and an increase of 65% over the past decade. There are also thought to be 549 000 people with undiagnosed type 2 diabetes. I am always a bit sceptical about this figure, because if we know how many people are at risk, why isn't anyone contacting these people to start the work?

Obesity epidemic and the impact of high-sugar diets

We all know that poor diet, such as high sugar and high fat, plus the lack of exercise contributes immensely to the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

The obesity epidemic debate took on new momentum at the turn of the year when the government launched its new “Sugar Smart” campaign (Public Health England, 2015). The launch was accompanied by revelations that five-year-old children eat and drink their body

weight in sugar every year. Promoted as part of the Change4Life campaign, the initiative includes a “Sugar Smart” app to help parents identify the levels of sugar in food and drink. The campaign is particularly targeted at the sugar content of children’s foods.

The research accompanying the publicity campaign produced some stark facts, which are particularly worrying against the backdrop of health concerns associated with those at risk of diabetes.

Sugary foods and drinks contain plenty of the calories that can lead to weight gain and, as we know, overweight people are more at risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

Cutting down on all sugars

This seemingly innocuous app, developed by the Government agency, Public Health England to help shoppers cut down on their sugar intake, has created a furore among the nation’s small businesses. Dozens of firms making what they claim to be nutritious drinks, snacks and desserts argue that the “Sugar Smart” app fails to distinguish between natural and refined sugars, generating “panic” among loyal followers.

Users of the app can scan a product barcode in the supermarket and see how many cubes of sugar it contains.

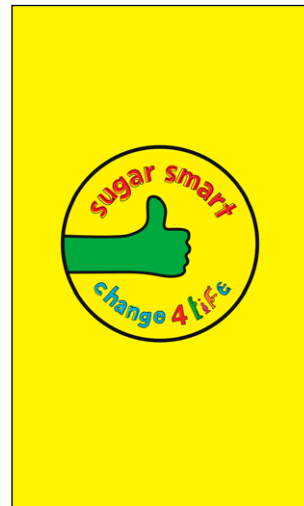


Figure 1. The Sugar Smart app is part of the Change4Life campaign

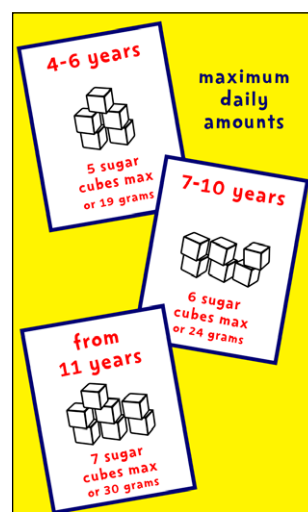


Figure 2. The app spells out the daily allowance for children up to 11 years

Amelia Harvey, the Chief Executive of London-based The Collective claimed:

“The app does not distinguish between naturally occurring sugars and other kinds of sugar, so the lactose in our yoghurt is coming up as sugar. It’s just adding to consumer confusion.”

Excuse my ignorance, but does it really matter whether it is a naturally occurring sugar or a refined sugar? All will increase the daily calorie intake and make the blood glucose levels rise, some more quickly than others.

I downloaded the app to see how it works. It is very easy to use, but, unfortunately, it is unable to recognise every product in the supermarket at the moment. As someone who is used to reading the nutritional labels on food packaging, I think the app and the Sugar Smart campaign has the ability to raise awareness of the hidden sugars we all blindly consume in a simple way. And this is exactly the reason for its creation.

Public Health England claimed the app was designed to be used in conjunction with other information and urged food manufacturers who believe consumers are being misled to get in touch. Dr Alison Tedstone, Chief Nutritionist at Public Health England said:

“The app shows total sugar, in keeping with front-of-pack labelling requirements. Where certain categories of products, such as plain dairy milks, have naturally occurring sugars, the app makes very clear they contain no added sugar, so people don’t need to worry about consuming them.”

Have you downloaded the app yet? If so, we’d love to know what you think? Has it helped you in your discussions with patients about healthy eating? Please do get in touch via: jdn@sbcommunicationsgroup.com.

Sugar tax

I was disappointed to read in the media that the sugar tax and the important Children’s Obesity Strategy report has been delayed by the government until summer. Tam Fry, spokesman for the National Obesity Forum has said:

“This constant delay in publishing the childhood obesity strategy is unforgivable...”

Let’s hope the government start giving the due diligence to this growing problem in our society and hopefully the development of type 2 diabetes and other serious conditions can be lessened. ■

Diabetes UK (2016) *Number of people with diabetes reaches over 4 million*. Diabetes UK, London. Available at: <http://bit.ly/11NSv9e> (accessed 03.03.16)

Public Health England (2015) *Let’s get Sugar Smart!* Public Health England, London. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1k3lvMY> (accessed 03.03.16)