

Dealing with the Sugar Seasons

There are certain times of the year when sweets are traditionally abundantly available (and heavily marketed).

Halloween, Christmas, and Easter are what we call the "Primary Sugar Seasons", those times of the year when the relentless marketing of high-sugar candies and foods can make it particularly difficult for those with a sweet tooth to say "no thanks".

There is a fourth annual sugar season called "Birthday Party Sugar Season". This season can happen at any time of the year and, between your birthday and that of friends and family members, often occurs multiple times in a year. The Birthday Party Sugar Season can run concurrent with or consecutive to the Primary Sugar Seasons, resulting in your being exposed to excessive sugar off and on all through the year.

THE REAL DANGER OF SUGAR SEASONS

A common concern with eating pies, cakes, chocolates, etc has to do with calories. That is correct, these things do contain a high count of empty calories (those calories with no nutritional value), but the calorie count is not the only problem with these foods.

The real danger of Sugar Seasons is the impact on your immune system.

It used to be the case that people would start to get sick after Halloween or Christmas or Easter, and we used to wonder if that was merely coincident with the onset of what has classically been called "the cold and flu seasons". During recent years, though, we see an increasing number of people getting sick within about a two-week period both before and after a sugar season. The difference is that the Sugar Seasons have been extended due to the vigorous marketing and almost boundless availability

of "holiday treats". The candy and junk food start appearing on retail shelves early in October (and often sooner) and the temptation to overindulge can be hard to resist.

This is not to say that the cold and flu seasons don't exist. They absolutely do, and your body's ability to detect and eradicate bacteria and viruses depends entirely on how well your immune system functions. Your immune system can be impaired by sugar.

Refined sugar depresses the immune system and makes you potentially more vulnerable to bacteria and viruses. The degree to which your immune system is suppressed is generally dose-dependent so the amount of sugar you consume and how frequently you consume it will often determine how big a hit your immune system takes. Large amounts of sugar at one time can be a huge blow to your immune system. Lesser amounts over a longer period of time can likewise have an enormous negative impact. Everyone is different, and everyone needs to be very careful about their sugar intake.

We know that a certain amount of indulgence in sweets is almost inevitable, so we have developed some strategies to help lighten the sugar load without denying yourself and your kids some treats.

HALLOWEEN

At Halloween, we go out trick-or-treating with the kids and come back with pillow cases full of sugary items, generally so much that the toxic sugar overload seems like it would be enough to kill anyone. Yikes! We let them have a few pieces each (to get it over with) and then, borrowing from Charles Schultz, tell them that at night, the "Great Pumpkin" will rise up from the pumpkin patch and exchange all of their "tricks" (the sugary rubbish) for treats they can have.

We try to impress upon the children that the sugary stuff is a treat and that its consumption must be very short term because long-term consumption is harmful to them.

We then package up the dried fruits and various other healthy treats listed below as well as prizes and leave them on the table for the morning when they get up.

EASTER

Dried fruits and nuts are a tasty alternative to sugar-laden confections.

We spend a week or two before Easter dehydrating fruits, usually bananas and apples to make banana and apple chips. Then the night before Easter we fill the little plastic Easter eggs with the banana chips or apple chips, one or two per egg.

In some eggs we will put money, like a dime or a nickel. In some eggs we put nuts like almonds or cashews. In some Easter eggs we put a puzzle clue. We create a word puzzle for each child, create the clues and put them in the eggs for the kids to find.

We then hide all the eggs for the next day. At the end of the Easter egg hunt they have fruit snacks, nuts and seeds, some change as well as a word scramble puzzle. They then have to solve the word puzzle, and find the prize, often a \$10 bill hidden in their shoe.

CHRISTMAS, THE SILLY SUGAR SEASON

Christmas is the toughest one to deal with, partly because the season goes on so much longer than Easter or Halloween. The Christmas Sugar Season usually starts at the beginning of December and goes right through to January. The amount of sugars, sweets, and junk food available in this season can be overwhelming.

Do we think that everyone is going to be able to resist the temptation of an absurd volume of sweets readily available over an extended period? No, we don't, but it is possible to be moderate.

At Christmas what we try to do is set up one or two "cheat" days, a day or two (two "cheat" days at a maximum, please) where eating a sugary treat is "okay". Again, bear in mind that the impact on the immune system is dose-dependent and the less sugar you consume, the lesser the blow to your immune system.

Resisting temptation pays off. After all, you and/or your kids being sick is not a good start to the New Year.

LIGHTENING THE SUGAR LOAD

Each year, we get more creative on how to get the kids through the Sugar Seasons undamaged. We have found, though, that as the children get older they get a better understanding of the importance of strictly limiting sugar intake and that they have developed self-control and habits that they are able to maintain.

Here are some suggestions to help lighten the sugar load while still providing you and your kids a few treats.

SUGAR SEASON TREATS

Fruits: The main Sugar Season treat you should use is fruit. Every day during Sugar Seasons, one snack should be a fruit-based snack. Get into the habit of cutting fruit up and making a fruit salad, or just having a special fruit every day. This is not a fruit leather bought at a store. Just plain old regular fruit three to five times a day, and making a habit of it during Sugar Seasons.

Taco chips: Another snack is low sodium/low salt corn taco chips and salsa. Most children love this, and the

good thing about it is that it's portable. You can put a bag of these taco chips in the car any time.

Popsicles: During any Sugar Seasons, no-sugar-added fruit juices are the best way to make popsicles. Retail outlets have popsicle trays that you just pour the unsweetened fruit juice in and place the plastic reusable popsicle handles in, and then freeze overnight. This gives you a quick, healthy alternative to sugary snacks or ice cream.

Fruit smoothies are also very healthy. 1 cup of water or rice milk, 1/2 cup of berries, frozen or fresh, 1/4 cup of almonds and 1 banana blended on high will make two servings. You can freeze it in the popsicle trays and make popsicles from this as well.

Trail mix is great for a quick snack. It's a good idea to combine a handful of regular nut and seed trail mix with a couple of pieces of fruit such as a banana or an apple. (Don't use trail mix that has candy, sugar, or salt added; these will depress the immune system).

Home-made bits 'n' bites: Crispix rice cereal, gluten free pretzels, any nuts, cheerios, canola oil, a small amount of sea salt, Worcestershire sauce. There are many very good recipes online. An easy one is to combine these ingredients in any quantity in a bowl, lay the mixture out on a baking sheet and bake it in the oven at 350°F for 30 to 60 minutes, turning and mixing every 15 minutes.

Rice crackers and humus is another great quick snack. Both items are readily available at grocery stores.

Juice boxes: We offer this to the kids as a Sugar Season treat only. Some people use juice boxes as a primary beverage for their children, but it's not a good idea. Juice boxes have far too much sugar in them for regular consumption. Save those for an infrequent Sugar Season treat.

Carob-covered almonds: We get these from outlets that sell organic foods (such as Planet Organic). We reserve these as a very special treat. (Warning – they

are quite expensive). They are very low sugar and taste like a dark chocolate covered almond. Some people find them slightly bitter (perhaps it's an acquired taste), but they are fantastic. In fact, they are so good that you'll have to be careful not to eat too many of them.

Dried fruits: We often use a dehydrator and make our own banana chips, apple chips, and fruit leathers. The advantage of this is that we are absolutely certain that there is no added sugar or other preservatives, although there are some grocery stores and other retail outlets that have additive-free dried fruits readily available.

Low-sugar snack bars: There are many brands of low-sugar snack bars. Read the labels and look for sugar content of less than 15 grams per bar. They are expensive, but the kids love them. Again, be sure to read the label to make sure they really are low sugar and don't let the kids eat a large quantity of them. They're not what you could call "healthy", but they are much lower in sugar than most of the chocolate and candies readily available in Sugar Seasons.

Sugary things can be very appealing, but resisting that temptation is sound advice. Refined sugar is indisputably an immune system depressant, so much so that ingesting it as little as once or twice a week can be enough to impair your immune system and fling the door wide open to pathogens.

Our wish for you is that you enjoy all the holidays seasons in good health.

Are you frequently ill? Do you have low energy? It might be caused by too much sugar in your diet. Severe sugar cravings can indicate an underlying health issue. The doctors at Green Apple Health Care can get the core of the issue with a full assessment and create a customized program to address the root cause.

Call us at (780) 485-9468.