Food and Nutrition Services, Fairfax County Public Schools

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The Truth on High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS)

High fructose corn syrup (HFCS) has received negative media attention, resulting in ongoing debate. Scientists have theorized HFCS has been a major contributing factor to the obesity epidemic. However, research has also revealed HFCS is not as harmful as once suggested. The American Medical Association announced in June 2008, high fructose corn syrup does not appear to contribute more to obesity than honey or sugar.

High fructose corn syrup was developed in the 1960's. It is a collection of glucose and sucrose monosaccharides (sugar molecules). Previously, sucrose, or table sugar, was the main sweetener added to foods. Sugar and HFCS are almost chemically identical. "So one is not more likely to cause obesity than another," says James M. Rippe, MD, biomedical sciences professor at the University of Central Florida. He advises parents to make sure no more than 200 of their child's total daily calories come from sweetened treats.

Why HFCS instead of sucrose?

- Less expensive
- Extended shelf life
- Easily blended into food

HFCS is in 40% of all sweetened foods and beverages and is found in a variety of products: soda, candy, baked goods, condiments, and more.

Foods that contain HFCS and other sugars are "empty calories" - high in calories with low or no nutritional value. The Food Guide Pyramid categorizes "empty calories" as "extras" and should be used sparingly.

The link between HFCS and obesity is still up for debate. Dietitians and health professionals agree the main explanation for weight gain and obesity is an imbalance of calories consumed and calories expended. Simply replacing HFCS with sucrose or other caloric sweeteners will not reduce obesity rates.

Balance your diet; eat mostly whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, low-fat dairy, lean meats, and drink plenty of water. Limit high fat and high sugar foods - soda, candy, and sweets. Always read food labels to ensure you are making wise selection.

American Medical Association

Food and Nutrition Services can assist in providing nutrition information. Call 703-813-4800 and ask for a Registered Dietitian.