

Hidden danger in sugary breakfast cereals

MALAY MAIL

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Sugar content for single serving of cereal (30g)

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PETALING JAYA — Breakfast cereals have long been marketed as the best way to start your day, but such products may be closer to candy than they are to whole grain foods of before.

While many may consider a bowl of cereal and milk to be a healthy meal, a survey of the nutritional content of many popular brands showed most have more sugar than is generally recommended for an entire day.

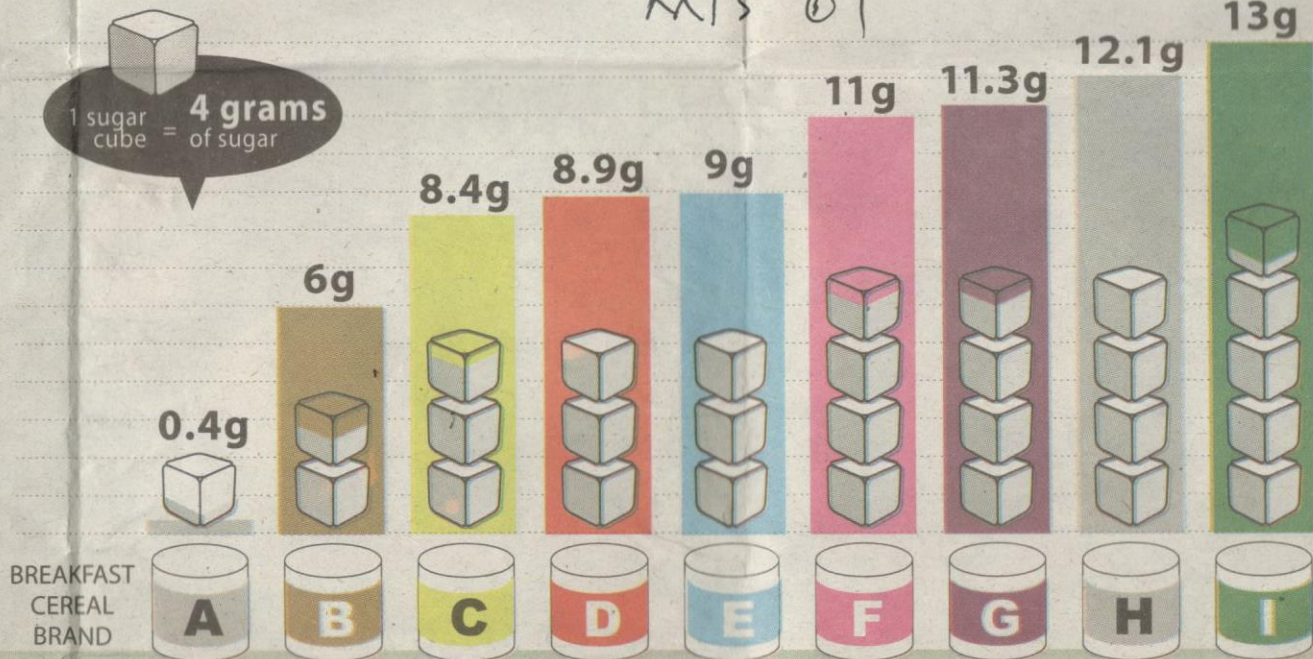
Malay Mail examined nine popular breakfast cereal brands targeted at young consumers and found that just one qualified as low in sugar.

In an average serving size of 30g of cereal, some can have up to 12g of sugar; this is before the addition of milk, which is also sweetened in most cases.

More worrying, dietician Goo Chui Hoong told Malay Mail, is that the recommended serving size is unlikely to satisfy most consumers — who would more likely consume double the amount.

Bumping up the portion to 60g along with 200ml of milk — which itself already contains around 10g of sugar — pushes the sugar content of a typical serving to 34g.

This will put an average serving close to the sugar content found in most candy bars,



which are generally between 40g and 50g each.

"The recommended serving size of 30g of cereals with ½ cup low-fat milk is a very small and it is not uncommon for people to consume double or more of that portion along with milk to make them feel full," Goo said.

"Although some cereals with powdered sugar have higher content than others, it is always advisable for consumers to take such products according to the recommended serving size."

According to the World Health Organisation dietary table, adults should not consume

more than five teaspoons or 25g of sugar a day on average.

The average adult burns 2,000kcal of energy per day, so processed sugar intake should not exceed five per cent of the required energy intake for general health, said Goo.

"It should consist of 50 per cent carbohydrates, 15 per cent protein and 30 per cent fat," she said.

"For children, their energy requirement varies from age and gender, with average energy needs ranging from 1,000 to 2,800 calories daily."

Nurzalinda Zalbahar, a nutritionist from the Department of Nutrition and Dietetics at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), similarly advised caution when consuming sugary cereals.

While most brands recommend a serving size, Nurzalinda said, most consumers are likely to just "eyeball" their portions, which could lead to overconsumption.

This could be avoided if consumers use a measuring cup.

"But usually, it is easy to just pour it instead. This is when we consume more than we are supposed to. Besides, most of the breakfast cereals available are loaded with sugar and fast digesting carbohydrates (that is known to have high glycemic index)," she said.

Glycemic Index, or GI, determines how quickly sugar is absorbed into the bloodstream. Sugar in high GI foods is released quickly and cause spikes in blood sugar levels, which could exacerbate conditions that are worsened by high blood glucose levels, such as in diabetes.

More than one in 10 Malaysians have some form of diabetes, according to the Health Ministry's data, and they are advised to avoid high GI food.

While it is important to have breakfast, both Nurzalinda and Goo recommend alternatives to sugary cereals.

For those accustomed to sweet cereals, Goo suggested alternatives such as fruits, wholegrain crackers or granola.

More traditional items may be oatmeal porridge, *thosai* with *dhal*, soupy noodles, multigrain bread with half-boiled eggs, wholemeal bread with a thin spread of peanut butter, or a bowl of fruit with low-fat yogurt.

"Whole grains contain more fibre than refined grains, as fibre slows down absorption

of sugar into your blood and is therefore helpful for people with diabetes to regulate blood sugar," said Goo.

Nurzalinda was also effusive about the benefits of a grain-rich diet over sweetened cereals.

"Wholegrain, whole wheat and oats are a good choice because they are high in nutrients and fibre, especially those without added sugar and dried fruits," she said.

Fibre also has the added benefit of increasing satiety without raising portion size, regulating bowel movements and possibly reducing serum cholesterol levels.

Both dieticians said Malaysians should be more disciplined with their portion sizes to avoid health problems and obesity.

Malaysia was listed at the most obese country in the region in an *Economist* Intelligence Unit report titled "Tackling Obesity in Asean". It found that 13.3 Malaysians were obese while 38.5 per cent were overweight.

"It must come back to the portion size, moderation and whether it is well-balanced or not," Goo said.

"Simply comparing *nasi lemak* with cereals, cereals are processed food with sugar added and most of the nutrients are lost during the process, while *nasi lemak* is prepared food and it is close to its natural form.

"But again, if we take *nasi lemak* or *roti canai* every day with sugary drinks such as *teh tarik*, it is not healthy, too. Same goes with cereals."

Goo advised consumers to be more proactive in learning what they are consuming, instead of relying on a food's reputation for healthy or otherwise.

"Do not be misled by the assumption or perception that something is healthy because it is labelled so," she said.

How much sugar is in your breakfast cereal



60 g of cereal with
250 ml of milk =
35g



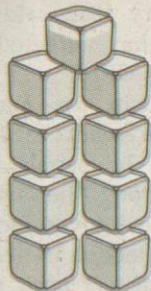
5 cookie =
6g



1 candy bar =
48g



1 soda pop
(325ml) =
40g



1 sugar
cube =
4 grams
of sugar

