66% of Packaged Foods in Canada Have Added Sugar

By Erik Lief — January 12, 2017

If this trend continues, Canadians may someday have more access to sugar than they have to ice skating.

New government research shows that when it comes to packaged foods and beverages sold in Canada, two of every three items contain added sugar of some kind. That jarring news comes from a joint report by Public Health Ontario and the University of Waterloo, made public today.

The labels of more than 40,000 products "sold at national supermarket chains of a major Canadian grocery retailer" in March of 2015 were analyzed, in an effort to identify any of 30 terms that indicated the presence of sugar, "everything from sugar to dextrose, high-fructose corn syrup, glucose, fructose and fruit juice concentrate," states a PHO release [1]. And 66 percent of them – more than 26,900 products in all – contained at least one added sugar.

"The number of products that contained added sugars was surprisingly high, particularly for beverages and baby foods," stated University of Waterloo's Dr. David Hammond, senior author of the study [2], titled "Added sugar in the packaged foods and beverages available at a major Canadian retailer in 2015: a descriptive analysis," and published online in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, CMAJ Open. "At the moment, it is very difficult for consumers to identify the presence of added sugars using nutrition labels and impossible to identify amounts of added sugars in packaged foods."

Nearly 80 percent of the 3,100 beverages studied were flagged for added sugar – an issue that we previously highlighted [3] about sugary fruit drinks – while more than 73 percent of the 1,000 yogurt offerings contained it as well. And of particular concern for parents, the study cites that
nearly half (48 percent) of baby food and infant formula contained added sugar.

"We searched for 30 different added sugar terms," the study states, "in the ingredients lists of the food products: agave, malt/barley malt, cane juice, caramel, carob, corn sweetener, corn syrup, date paste, dextran, dextrose, diastase, ethyl maltol, Florida crystals, fructose, fruit juice concentrate, galactose, glucose, glucose-fructose, high-fructose corn syrup, honey, lactose, maltodextrin, maltose, molasses, nectar, panocha, sucrose, sugar, syrup and treacle." In addition, Public Health Ontario defines added sugars "as all sugars added to foods by the manufacturer plus the sugars naturally present in honey, syrups and fruit juices."

Depending on the circumstances and limits of the study, one statistic that raises eyebrows is that more than 12,500 products – or 31 percent of all items examined – were "sweets and snacks." Of those, 86 percent made the added-sugar list. This begs the question why so many goods that are sold as sweets made their way into this study, which had the potential to exaggerate the results.

The Canadian Sugar Institute, in response, pointed out that the study had "limitations," two of which being that the foods and beverages studied "all came from one major grocery store chain, and that only pre-packaged foods were considered," Canadian Television News.ca reported. The Institute added "the average Canadian consumes about 11 per cent of their daily energy from all sources of added sugars, which is close to the World Health Organization guideline of 10 per cent."
In March 2015, WHO officially recommended [5] that "adults and children reduce their daily intake of free sugars to less than 10% of their total energy intake."

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