Movie Review: O-D'ing on Sugar Produces Flabby Science

By ACSH Staff — August 26, 2015

Want to see a fun movie? Take a gander at That Sugar Film, which is about Australian actor Damon Gameau's dietary odyssey. The movie is fast-paced and includes clever touches such as a Gameau acting magician-like, creating snappy images to illustrate the history and current-day consumption of sugar which is the focus of the film.

It seems that Gameau, who says he normally eats a diet high in healthy fats, decided to experiment on himself to learn the effects of a high, no make that very high sugar diet. Learning that Australians consume, on average, nearly 40 teaspoons of sugar per day (160 grams or 640 calories), he decided to forswear his usual consumables and stick to a diet including 40 teaspoons of sugar per day for 2 straight months.

Gameau was careful to point out that his sugar didn't come from the usual candy, ice cream or what he called junk foods. Instead, he stuck to items such as granola/energy bars, sweetened cereals, fruit juices and yogurt. To make sure he reached his goal every day, in one scene we find him pouring table sugar on a broiled chicken breast. And he actually ate it.

This scenario should sound familiar, since it's what Morgan Spurlock did back in 2004 to demonize McDonald's food. And like Spurlock, Gameau finds that his altered diet plays havoc with his body. He gains about 19 pounds, increases his waist circumference by 10 cm (about four inches) and his percent body fat by seven percent. None of these changes, of course, is good.
So, does this mean that sugar is the evil ingredient, replacing fat as our dietary bête noir. Not exactly. Adding 640 calories of sugar to anyone’s diet would be enough to account for weight and fat gain as well as at least some metabolic abnormalities. But Gameau says he didn’t do that. He states that before his sugar trip he usually consumed about 2,300 calories per day, not an unreasonable amount, and then adds that even in his high-sugar days he continued to eat 2,300 calories. That wouldn’t have been an unreasonable comparison of his two diets. But did he really do that?

If the moviegoer watches closely, one would see a couple of scenes in which Mr. Gameau is shown actually measuring some of his foods in order to get the proper amount of sugar. In one scene, he’s pouring cereal in a measuring cup fills it to the brim for one cup, and then adds about another half cup for a 1 ½ cup serving. Then, he wants to have a couple of teaspoons of yogurt. So he spoons up a couple of heaping teaspoons of yogurt, using a regular teaspoon.

What’s wrong with this picture is, frankly, its inaccuracy. It’s hard for anyone to keep an accurate record of what and how much they eat. And if you’re trying to match two diets on the basis of caloric intake, the only way to really do that is by weighing the foods.

Obviously, Gameau didn’t do that. Most likely he substantially underestimated his caloric intake when he was going the high sugar route his supposed teaspoon of yogurt looked more like two or three than one.

What’s the evidence for an underestimate? He gained weight. More important, he gained body fat. That doesn’t happen without an increased calorie intake. So while excess sugar may well have contributed to his physical deterioration, it was far from the whole story.

So if you want to watch an entertaining, engaging film, take a look at That Sugar Film. Just don’t assume it’s scientifically valid.