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No added sugars? Wrapper may be misleading you

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CHENNAI: What's in a name? An 'ose', say diabetologists, by every one of its names is just as sweet and harmful. And more frightening is that according to a just-published study, most Chennaiites may not be able to tell their sugars apart. A recent study on 'Perception of Sugar Content in Food Labels among Supermarket Consumers in Chennai City' found that 77% of the respondents did not look specifically for sugar content in the food they were buying although a majority were aware of the ill effects of sugar consumption. Only 2% read the contents on the label, the rest were more interested in brand, offers and price. Also, only 29% were aware of terms such as artificial sweeteners and non-caloric sweeteners.

The study, conducted by Department of Conservative Dentistry and Endodontics, Sri Venkateswara Dental College and Hospital and funded by the Indian Council of Medical Research, was published in the Journal of Pierre Fauchard Academy (India Section) this March.

The 'no added sugars', 'no added flavours', and 'no added preservatives' all add up, says Dr Poorni Saravanan, one of the lead authors of the study. "Corn starch, for instance, is a hidden sugar, which many were not aware of," she says.

While the study was originally undertaken with dental caries in mind, says Dr Poorni, it took a more serious turn when the researchers realized people were not aware of the contents of the food they were buying.

Sugar can be listed under 61 different names, but the rule of thumb, according to dietician

Shiny Chandran, is that anything on the label that ends with an 'ose' has sugar. And that means dextrose, lactose, fructose and glucose. "It is best if the sugar content is less than 3% of all the ingredients," she says. "Cookies, breakfast cereal, Indian-Chinese fusion food, ketchup all contain sugars. Everything that is supposedly low fat foods contain hidden sugars because that is the only way to enhance taste."

WHO guidelines recommend adults and children to reduce their daily intake of free sugars to less than 10% of their total energy intake. A further reduction to below 5% or roughly 25 grams (6 teaspoons) per day would provide additional health benefits, say the guidelines.

Dr Vijay Viswanathan of the M V Hospital for Diabetes says that most of his patients are also not aware that there are two types of artificial sweeteners – caloric and non-caloric (like stevia). "People assume all sweeteners are good for them. Maltodextrin for instance is a caloric sweetener so those with issues of obesity and fatty liver and diabetes need to be wary. Most diabetic sweets contain the caloric sweetener lactulose and to make it more palatable, fat is added," he says.

Dr Poorni says the study also threw up a problem that is unique to India. "The contents are listed in English and this is a barrier for most consumers. It has to be addressed by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India," she says.