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A Roadmap to Lowering Added Sugars in U.S. Foods

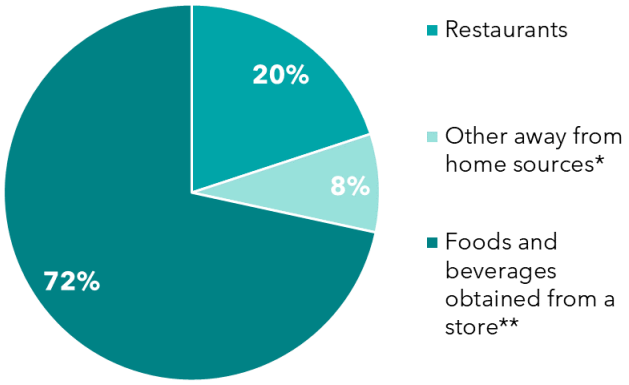
Voluntary Added Sugars Reduction Targets for the U.S. Food Industry

The Problem

The U.S. food supply is swimming in added sugars.[1] The average American consumes far more added sugars than is recommended for a healthy diet (17 teaspoons, or 13% of total daily calories).[2,3] Less than 10% of total daily calories should come from added sugars.[4] Overconsumption of foods or beverages high in added sugars is linked to an increased risk of type 2 diabetes[5,6,7] and cardiovascular disease,[8,9,10] in part by increasing the risk of weight gain,[11] and can contribute to dental decay.[12] However, foods and beverages with high concentrations of added sugars are common in the U.S. food supply, making it difficult for individuals to lower their added sugars intake and improve the nutritional quality of their diet.

The predominant sources of added sugars in Americans' diets are foods and beverages purchased from retail stores and restaurants, including sugary drinks, sweet bakery products, and candy (Figure 1).[13,14] **As a result, consumers have only limited control over the amounts of added sugars they consume.** Food and beverage companies are largely responsible for introducing excess added sugars into the food supply.

Figure 1. Average daily intake of added sugars in the U.S. population by source (NHANES 2017–2018)



**Other away from home sources: food and beverage obtained from school cafeterias, daycare centers, summer camps, community food programs, street vendors, vending machines, etc. **Source includes both manufacturer-added sugars and sugars added to foods and beverages by consumers at home.*

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can address this problem by guiding food and beverage companies to gradually reduce the amount of added sugars in their products over time, thereby lowering added sugars content across key categories of food and beverage products that contribute to high added sugars intake in the United States.

The Solution: Reformulation

Companies can reduce the amount of added sugars in foods and beverages via **product reformulation,** new product development, and selective marketing. **Reformulation** is the process of altering the composition of a food or beverage product to improve its nutritional profile by, for example, reducing its content of ingredients or nutrients of concern.[15] The United States is no stranger to policies that spur reformulation, as demonstrated by the ban of partially hydrogenated oils (the primary dietary source of *trans* fat) in 2015,[16] mandatory

fortification policies to add essential nutrients to staple foods, and the FDA's sodium reduction guidance for the food industry. The latter bears strong resemblance to a petition recently filed.

Just this year, CSPI and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYC DOHMH) **petitioned FDA to develop voluntary and measurable added sugars targets** for the food and beverage categories that contribute most to overall added sugars intake. These targets would provide guidance for the food and beverage industry to reformulate and reduce the amount of added sugars in their products gradually over time.

Added sugars reformulation guidelines provide benefits[17] for individuals, public health, and the private sector:

- **Individuals** benefit from greater access to foods and beverages with less added sugars.
- Widespread reduction of added sugars across the food supply is predicted to result in **national public health benefits.** In one modeling study,[18] achieving sugar reduction targets was estimated to prevent 2.48 million cardiovascular disease events, 490,000 cardiovascular disease deaths, and 750,000 diabetes cases and save $160.88 billion in lifetime net costs.
- The **private sector** benefits from a common system to define and measure progress in added sugars reduction, in which added sugars reduction targets are defined equitably by FDA covering all products in key categories. Companies can then market their reformulated, or newly developed products to consumers increasingly demanding healthier products.

The Blueprint: Sodium and Sugar Reduction

Thankfully, FDA won't have to start from scratch to develop added sugars reduction guidance for the food industry. In fact, FDA has many helpful model policies to refer to when developing the new guidance.

FDA Voluntary Sodium Guidance

- In 2021, FDA issued final guidance establishing short-term voluntary sodium reduction targets to encourage food manufacturers to remove excess sodium from processed, packaged, and prepared foods.[19] The goal of the sodium guidance was to reduce sodium intake at the population level, thus lowering the rates of high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.

National Salt and Sugar Reduction Initiative

- In 2009, NYC DOHMH launched a partnership of about 100 health organizations from across the U.S. to develop the National Salt Reduction Initiative, which set voluntary sodium reduction targets to lower the amount of sodium in packaged and restaurant foods.[20,21] FDA used this initiative as a model when developing its own sodium guidance years later.

- In 2018, the initiative expanded to the National Salt and Sugar Reduction Initiative, with an additional goal of reducing total sugars in the food supply. In 2021, NYC DOHMH released sugar reduction targets for 15 categories of packaged foods and beverages that contribute the most added sugars to the diet.[22]

U.K. Sugar Reduction Program

- In 2016, the U.K. government directed Public Health England (PHE) (since replaced by the U.K. Health Security Agency and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) to lead a broad sugar reduction program to challenge all sectors of the food and beverage industry to reduce added sugars in their products by at least 20% by 2020, with a 5% reduction in the first year.[23] PHE targeted the food and beverage products that contributed the greatest amount to children's total sugar intakes and developed sugar reduction goals for each product category. After four years, PHE reported a reduction in the sales-weighted average total sugars for all food product categories targeted in the program and a 3.5% reduction for the overall sales-weighted average total sugars of products sold.[24]

- Even greater reductions were seen in specific food categories like breakfast cereals (-14.9%), yogurts (-13.5%), sweet spreads and sauces (-10.1%), ice creams, lollies, and sorbets (-7.2%), and morning goods (-4.9%).[25] Among the beverage categories after three years, the greatest sales-weighted average reduction in total sugar was in pre-packed milk-based drinks (-29.7%), pre-packed fermented yogurt drinks (-7.1%), and pre-packed flavored milk substitute drinks (-6.9%).

The Pathway: FDA Guidance

CSPI and NYC DOHMH's petition[26] to FDA asks for the following key actions:

1) **Issue guidance** for the food and beverage industry that provides voluntary short-term (2.5-year), mid-term (5-year), and long-term (10-year) targets for added sugars content in commercially processed and packaged foods and beverages from categories that contribute most to overall added sugars intake. FDA should develop two sets of targets for each food and beverage category: 1) sales-weighted mean targets that represent the goal for average added sugars content of all products in a category,

and 2) upper bound targets that establish a maximum amount of added sugars for any product in a category.

2) **Develop a plan for monitoring the food industry's progress** towards achieving the targets.
3) **Create a public online database** of all products included in the targeted food categories including key brand, nutrition, and ingredient information.
4) **Provide interim public progress reports** evaluating industry compliance with targets and report any significant changes in other nutrients of concern, like sodium or saturated fat.
5) **Extend the scope of this guidance** to include voluntary added sugars reduction targets for prepared foods and beverage categories that contribute the most to overall added sugars intake as soon as regulations require restaurants to declare added sugars nutrition information.

Added sugars reduction in our food system is a key strategy to support public health and there is strong support for it among consumers. In a Caravan poll conducted in March 2023, **75% of U.S. consumers said they would support a policy with recommendations to reduce the amount of added sugars in foods**, including:

- 83% of consumers who are trying to reduce their sugar intake
- 80% of consumers with children in their household
- 79% of consumers with high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, or cancer
- 70% of Republicans, 83% of Democrats, 73% of Independents

The FDA has the tools and expertise to make an important impact on the health of Americans through added sugar reduction. It should build on the momentum of its voluntary sodium reduction targets and provide similar guidance on added sugars reduction targets to create a healthier food supply and reduce the burden of diet-related chronic disease in the United States.

Learn more about how added sugars reduction guidance can improve the food supply and promote public health by contacting science@cspinet.org.

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