Sweet Deception: Unveiling Sugar's Impact On Our Kids' Health Transcript

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Introduction and why sugar matters

Welcome back to ADHD, Autism and Chronic Disease Parenting Summit. I'm really excited to talk to my colleague. Doctor Michael Goren, who I always love talking to.

He's the director of nutrition and obesity program at Saban Research at USC, and also the author of an amazing book that I absolutely love called Sugar Proof.

Thank you so much for being here. Great to be here. Thanks for. Thanks for having me on. And congratulations to you on everything that's happened. Your new book, your new Baby.

Exciting times. Thank you so much. So I think sugar is a really interesting topic to talk about because it's in basically all of our food. But I'm curious as to why you took this up as a cause, why you thought that, you know, sugar is such an important topic that you want to write a book on it.

I mean, obviously you're involved in diet and nutrition and obesity, but what was it that led you to write a book called Sugar Proof and talk about that?

Yeah, it really stemmed from the studies, the findings that we had from the research that we've been doing for many years. And the realization that sugar plays such an important role in derailing childhood health and development for many different perspectives and honestly, kind of a little bit of frustration, because we do the research takes years.

We write the papers. Very few people actually read the papers, but were I realized there, there's a lot of practical information in there that goes beyond the research.

So I really wanted to translate the findings from research papers that nobody really reads to parents like you and me and other people listening that could really use that information in practical ways.

Do you think that sugar is a topic which we should be talking a lot more about in terms of our health complications these days, and in America and around the world?

I mean, we're having a, you know, obesity epidemic, a diabetes epidemic. Things are certainly going in the wrong direction. And there are many things that that could be blamed for that.

And certainly there are more than one. There's more than one reason. But I do think that sugar is the biggest reason, or maybe one of the biggest reasons.

But I'm curious, do you feel like it hasn't been discussed, like I feel like in the past it was like more like fats and saturated fats and things like that that we were super worried about, but not as much about sugar.

Do you feel like that's a mistake that we made? And we should be focusing a little more on sugar? Yeah, I think so. I mean, it's it's not the only factor.

Like, it's it's multifactorial. It's complicated. A lot of contextual factors, but sugar is a common factor and one that we can address and one that we can modify.

Sugar, obesity, and the need for better awareness

But it hasn't been talked about. And, you know, it's easy to vilify fat. It's easy to vilify some other aspects of the diet that vilifying sugar is tough because there's a lot of aspects of the diet they relate to sugar that we enjoy and other

part of our culture and part of celebration.

So I think we have we haven't found the happy medium yet. You know, we can we can't eradicate sugar, but we have to find a happy medium that we can still enjoy food and enjoy all the good things that go along with it, that kind of overdoing it now.

It's just everywhere. Like you said at the beginning. And it's it's processed foods. Really. 70% of processed foods contain some types of sugar, and liquid sugar is a big problem with drinking sugar, which we never used to do.

So I think we can if we scale back on these types of things, I think we can find a healthy medium. I don't believe in eradication of sugar, Which would be hard to do since in a lot of foods naturally anyways.

But that was what I was curious and I what it what I wanted to ask you about next is, you know, kind of delineating for, for parents, you know, natural sugar and like, you know, an apple or a fruit versus processed sugar and are you as concerned about something in a, in a berry as you are about something in a processed food?

And are those two things even the same? Right. No, they're not. I mean, I like to think of it as the good, the bad and the ugly. So sugars and fruits, perfectly good fruit should be part of the healthy diet.

Just don't eat a lot of it all at once, which very few people would actually be doing. But there's no problems with the natural sugars in food is when we liberate the sugars from the fruit into juice, for example, and drink it, in which case we've concentrated it and removed many of our many of the healthy aspects.

So by sugars, really, and sugar, we're really focused on the added sugars. Sugars are added to food doing, processing, baking, cooking and preserving.

That's the bad sugars that we're mainly focused on. And really the ugly, which is another whole topic in of itself is the is the sweeteners, the alternative to sugars that we can talk about later.

So sugars are, you know, different perspectives, different effects on the body and should should be kind of handled very differently. Yeah. And I mean, you mentioned there just very briefly about the sweeteners.

But yeah, I also get the questions a lot. I'm sure you get all the time about like what sugar should you use? I mean, because people are still going to want to sweeten up their food.

And at least for me, generally what I try to encourage people to do is to use real ingredients for their sugars, like honey or maple sirup or dates. Think things like that.

I mean, you're you're going to you can still get too much if you eat a ton of it, but in general, you're going to be like, I feel like a lot healthier and safer if you're using something that comes from a natural source than a processed source, like high fructose corn sirup or something along those lines, and similarly with a sweetener, you know, they might say that it's better, but then five years from now, we're going to realize that it's worse if we don't already realize that it's worse now.

And in any probably anything process is not, for the most part, going to be that good for you. But what are your thoughts on that? Absolutely.

Natural sugar vs added sugar

Yeah. You know, I think there's, there's there's a hierarchy to me, certainly in my kitchen, in my baking and cooking. I use raw, all honey maple sirup, even coconut sugar, brown sugar.

Just try to use less of it. So that's definitely fine. The, you know, ideally using whole foods to sweeten. So all of the recipes in sugar proof use the natural sweeteners.

So things like bananas or dates or even any, any dried fruit, that provides sweetness and flavor. Those are, those are fine. And I think, you know, the evidence that we do know about the sweeteners, even the natural ones like stevia and monk fruit, which are advertised as natural.

They're yeah, they come from a natural source, has the sugar itself, which is purified from sugar cane. Monk fruit sweetener is a is a compound, is a chemical purified from monk fruit.

And the same for stevia. It's an active chemical. So it's a that's too purified and processed out of the study. So everywhere you look at it would not we would talking about additives, chemicals being added to the diet that may or may not have problems.

The evidence so far, on balance I would say is not great. And you're always better off with sweetening with a natural or food source or the raw source itself.

And I think it's getting even more complicated for for parents, whether you're professional or non professional, because the words keep changing and there's. Just.

So many words that these companies are using to sound healthier. But it's not, you know, necessarily healthier. Like you say the word natural. So there's, you know, natural flavors and, and artificial flavors and natural sweeteners.

And I would say, yeah, probably if it's from a natural source is probably better than an artificial source in terms of being in a lab, but it still probably kind of came from a lab, just from a natural source versus from, you know, some chemistry test tube.

But but I don't know, probably at the end of the day, all of these things are not not great for you. And what is great or what's better for you is a real food.

Right. And, you know, it's probably not the end of the world if you have a sweetener every now and again, but if you're using it every single day, we're probably going to come to realize over time that all of these things are are very bad for us. And I think we're already there.

You know, I just don't think it's mainstream information yet because the companies, I think, hold the power over the what they, what they put out there.

And they're not going to change unless we force them to. Right. Companies, I mean, companies are using that tactic to say, yeah, we're cutting back on sugar or our overall sugar content is reduced, but really, all they're doing is replacing it with, sweeteners.

So that allows them to, say they're producing products with less sugar. So it's food companies and, and influencers who are pushing a lot of misinformation on the public.

I mean, the reality is we we don't have great actual data on the effects of these individual compounds or products. But the information we do know to me does not paint, a glorious picture.

Not to mention the fact that they just don't taste good so it can alter the, taste. And I think we're drifting away slowly from the natural goodness. And the natural flavors of are using a real food.

Yeah, I, I think it's sad that we are slowly drifting away from real food more and more towards artificial food. And there are some place that I get it.

I mean, there's a lot of people on in the earth, and they want to make sure that everybody has food. Like there are some positives to it.

Sweeteners and processed alternatives

You don't want people to go hungry, but at the same time, I think that we're making a mistake in terms of pushing us towards companies and corporations and producing food into mass produce way versus figuring out ways that we can produce more food locally and naturally.

Doesn't mean you can't have any of the other food too. But we're not. I don't see almost any motion towards localizing, you know, food production and having more home gardens, having more gardens with involved with stores.

I mean, you know, certain individuals do it certain, you know, groups do it and they kind of push it. But it's not a, a mainstream kind of thing, which is possible.

You could have a garden on every street. You could have playgrounds, have gardens in them, you could have grocery stores growing. Some stuff on the roofs, like these are all things that we could do, if we wanted to.

And then we can kind of have a mixture of some of the artificial stuff and more of the natural stuff, but it doesn't. We're not doing that yet. I hope one day that is going to change, but it's not going to come from the corporations.

It's going to have to come from people and, you know, people like you who get enough research out there. We can get up 3000 of you, you know, doing research on the same topic and bang over people's head like, this is not good for our health is terrible.

Let's do this other thing. We could do it. It's not like people can't make gardens. They just have to have to prioritize it. Yeah. It's all it's all doable if we got the priorities straightened out.

But you know, there's a lot of complicated food policies and, issues and food lobbying like you mentioned earlier, that are kind of more powerful voices.

But I think it comes back to grassroots movements. And that's what we're trying to do with sugar. Cruz is just trying to get out there, talk to parents, work with people like yourself to get the word out through your channels.

And a lot of times, unfortunately, we're going to be preaching to the choir, which can be a little frustrating. I think, you know, the the there's a huge disparity here in some of these things also that we shouldn't forget about in terms of underserved communities, impoverished communities, who have even poorer access to healthy food and greater economic burdens, who are more susceptible to the impact of poor nutrition on their health.

Yeah. No, I, I couldn't agree more. I want to transition a little bit into the why the why of the problem with sugar. And, you know, maybe get down a little bit more to the individual level for parents who who are watching this.

And I kind of wanted to start by asking you about the health consequences of eating too much sugar. So basically what I want to what I'm wanting to discuss a little bit more is, you know, parents, I think, for the most part have to understand that sugar is not that good for you, but I'm not sure they understand why.

So if they're eating a bunch of sugar, what's that doing to them? How is that affecting them long term? And I know that this is, you know, very much within the realm of what what you talk about and what you do.

So I was wondering if you could elaborate on that a little bit in the I kind of why what's the problem with sugar. Yeah. And for kids especially, there's, there's additional, effects because for when kids are have a built in preference for food, for sugar and for sweetness, and it's supposed to be a protective mechanism that would favor, consuming breast milk, which was sweet, and avoid food spoiled before we had the modern conveniences, that we do now. So, this was an evolutionary advantage, which is backfiring in today's high sugar food environment, where, food companies, you could argue, are thriving or taking advantage of that preference by making foods sweeter and getting kids to like them more and getting them hooked on it and the whole market of formula and transition milks and early foods, which are very sweet products, would be a good example of that.

So first of all, we have sugars everywhere. Kids have a built in preference. Third is in terms of why is that? Turns

out that kids are more susceptible to some of the harmful effects of sugars, more susceptible to you and I and all the other parents.

And that's because of their unique physiology that their bodies are building, their organs are developing, and because of the physiology, they are more susceptible.

Food systems, local production, and access

And this to me was a huge revelation and wake up call during the writing of the book that became stronger. Let me give you a very clear cut example of that that is much more tangible and visceral, that tooth decay.

We know sugar sugars caused, teeth to rot. And this is quite prevalent in kids now, why why are kids more susceptible to tooth decay? That's because their teeth are still developing and they don't have the enamel yet to protect the teeth from the acid produced by the bacteria.

No matter if feeding on the sugar. So that's just, you know, a clear cut example. But you can also think of other examples where the body, the organs are evolving and that natural development of those organs can be derailed by excess sugar.

And I feel like it's very interesting as a parent to watch your child, especially, you know, we're pretty health conscious family. We don't use a lot of sugar in anything that that we cook at home.

Certainly not artificial sugar. And then you watch your child eat some artificial sugar, whatever, you know, a party or something like that. And it's amazing to me to watch how much of a difference there is in such a short time in its behavior.

And I think that we just don't realize how much it affects us, because either you're most people are just eating it constantly, so that's just their baseline, or they don't really pay attention to those things.

But as a physician who's interested in integrative medicine and certainly really focus on something like sugar, which is one of the most important topics, I think it's just so mind boggling to watch it in your own child.

And to see the difference. And then it really makes me wonder how how much of the behavioral issues that we see with kids are the focus issues with kids are nothing more than, the food that we're eating or certainly not contribute in a significant way from the food that we're eating.

And people don't even even realize that they think they're eating healthy, but they're getting something that's processed with a lot of sugar. And those kids are maybe highly sensitive to that sugar, but it's just they're always eating that every day.

So it's, you know, I'm curious what you would you family like, cause that's what I just see at home. And I think it's really interesting. Yeah. I mean, I think that we see that a lot.

And again, that's in Sugar Proof. We wanted to come up with strategies to try and curtail that issue. And, to, to to reverse or treat that issue. And again, it's, it's to do with this preference because once kids start eating sugar, they want more because there is that built in preference.

And there is that addictive element to sugar and sweet food. So it's, you know, you get into a, a cycle of more sugar begets more sugars in some of our strategies, and just simple tricks to try and scale that back and reverse it in a way.

And if we want to finish up in in a few minutes. But I guess what are some of the big takeaways that you you would want parents to know over the years of research that you've done when it comes to sugar writing this book, what are some of the things that surprised you, and what are some of the big takeaways that that you would want to leave them with when it comes to sugar?

And I will I'll start with mine. So you know for sure. I think you shouldn't add any artificial sugar to any of the food you make at home. Almost ever.

Why sugar affects children more

I mean, the things that you mentioned, like, you know, coconut sugar, dates, that kind of stuff, I think that's fine. But to me, I didn't even think about this when I was growing up.

I certainly didn't think about it ten years ago. But now I'm very conscious that we never we don't even buy it. It's not in our home. So I'm curious what what takeaways you have gotten after diving so deeply into this, this topic.

And you know how you handle that with your own family? Yeah, it's I think, you know, it's a couple of different things. So, yeah, a little bit of sugar is fine.

I mean, I mean, just an example. I made salad dressing last night at home. Yeah. I put a teaspoon of, brown sugar in there. But, you know, that's much better than buying a salad dressing.

And I've used that over salad and, like, we will eat a lovely salad out of it. So it's an example of how it can be okay. I think we've got to kind of focus more on the bigger ticket items like liquid sugar.

So we don't bring liquid sugar into the house. And I urge parents not to. And I'm talking about sodas, juices and such. Like kids will have plenty of opportunities outside the home, but you have to create a home environment is one that you do have control over, and liquid sugar should not be a part of that.

And you know, that's just pretty new information is a realization that when sugar is consumed in liquid format, is very concentrated and it's metabolized very differently and tends to be much more harmful to the body, especially growing bodies.

And I mean, generationally, it's a pretty new thing. We have data to show that kids weren't drink fridge used to drink water and milk for their. But there's source of hydration and that it's juice and soda and energy drinks and all the rest of it.

So this is a generational shift, and I think we need to take a hard look at that. But as a parent, you can resolve that pretty easily. Definitely. And one last question, something very tangible.

So for a parent who's going to the store buying a product and you know, they've listened and they're like, okay, I'm going to start reading labels. I'm going to look at the labels.

I'm going to try to, you know, be more mindful of what I'm purchasing. What are your what is your advice for what they should look for on that label? What should they what ingredients should they avoid?

How much sugar is is too much sugar like when you're reading a label? What? What do you do when when you're choosing a product and what are you avoiding?

Yeah, it's a great question. And I'm I've made some mistakes before. I mean, you know, I've come home from the store with a product and taken a closer look at it and realized, it wasn't as good as it was made out to be.

And that happens. But what I'm looking for are in front of the food label, the main food label where you have the calories and the fat and the sugars.

We now have a line for added sugars, so I'm looking for added sugars. Let's say you're buying a yogurt, for example. There's natural sugars in yogurt from a degree from the lactose, which is perfectly fine.

But if there's any sugar added to it, it will show up now separately as added sugar. So that's one thing I'm looking for. And these added sugars can add up.

So look for products like yogurts Ketchups bars, crackers, breads. Look for products without added sugars. And then that story doesn't end there unfortunately, because it's a bit more complicated than that is.

You have to look at the ingredient list, which can be like super complicated. And this ingredient list is giving you a headache to look at. It's probably not good.

Behavior, cravings, and family experiences

But because these sweeteners that we talked about, those wouldn't show up on the front of the package label. You have to look for those on the ingredient list.

And basically we're looking for things that just don't look right or complicated words or, yeah, at least as a first pass. So it's a little bit of a bit of a detective job to kind of navigate through that.

But generally with Journal, if you stick with organic products where you can, you're pretty safe. And stick with, no added sugars, but something you can take in, no added sugars and kind of, you know, you know, advertise, there's no added sugars.

But then you get home, look in the ingredients list and it's got monk fruit sweetener or stevia sweeteners, something like that in there. And I think you should avoid those opting for more natural products.

Yeah, I know I, I couldn't agree more. And I think that just like you said, I mean, you're one of the foremost researchers in this field and still complicated for you.

So, you know, for me, it's like you literally need to get a detective glass, you know, a magnifying glass out and be a detective. And and the as smart as anybody is, they keep changing the game, you know, every, every year.

It's like there are new words and different regulations and, and I think that it's good that we're at least more mindful of these things. So something like you said, like, you know, they're writing up added sugar now.

So, you know, there's some motion trying to make sure that they're transparent. But it's really hard. And they have multi-billion dollar groups of people figuring out how they can get in products that are cheaper to make more money.

And that's that's their job. And our job is to figure out what is healthy for our own families, and that the advice you gave is what I tell people. Like, basically, exactly.

If the words are on there that you don't know is probably not good for you. So maybe choose to use a different product, but at least, at least look for those things.

Look at the added sugar, because at the end of the day, we all get way too much sugar. Nobody that lives in the modern society needs any more sugar.

Practical takeaways for parents and label reading

So any any place that you can minimize it, any place that you can make your own food, just like you said, you know, you put in a little a little scoop of sugar and that's fine. You know, it's not going to be a big deal.

You know exactly what's in there. And it's not 30 scoops. It's just a little bit it's and we just don't realize, you know, when you talk about like, yogurt, all these things, when you when you look at, you know, people go on a TV show and they're like, oh my gosh, like, look how much you know, but how much sugar is in this yogurt?

It's like a pile this big or in one one drink. It's like this big. Like we don't realize what's in there, and we must realize what we're what we're giving out.

Yeah, I mean, I think you're, you know, you know, great advice. And what I try to do also is just keep it simple. So here's another example. I do like yogurt.

I found a good yogurt that has the Icelandic yogurt very high in protein, 19g of protein per serving. Sometimes I like a little flavor in there. So what do I do?

This morning I took a little half teaspoon of apricot jam because I, which I have around and I just mix it into the yogurt. You can do the same with mashing a banana or a little bit of honey.

So keep it simple, you know, eat it. Food companies make it flavorful. Yogurt. It's got a whole lot. Just a sugar in there, but lots of butter, preservatives and compounds.

You don't have to start from scratch, but you can start with a with a base. A base product, like plain yogurt. And you can add your own flavorings to it and kind of make that even a bit more personalized, a bit more fun as well.

Yeah, that's just such great advice to, to finish on because, you know, people think they have to do everything and you don't. Every little bit that you do helps.

And if you are, you know, even if the yogurt that you have is not the best yogurt, but it's a better version and you don't get the flavoring and all the, the crap and sugar in there, and then you just put it in yourself.

Yes, maybe the sugar thing you put in there, it's not the best, but it's a million times better than what you would have, but which it all adds up. Every little change helps because we can have some sugar.

For sure. We can. And we can eat some of these products. It's just that it's very obvious that we're eating too much of this stuff, and it's now creating a health epidemic.

And so we need to come backwards a little bit. We don't have to stop eating any of this food. We just can't continue to eat as much as we are in the portions that we're eating it on, the consistency that we're eating it.

So if we kind of Peter back a little bit and not to say you have to eat broccoli every day for everything, that's not true. We just can't have, you know, a cup full of sugar seven times a day like that.

There's a point where it's just too much for our body and we're getting there now. That's right. Yeah. So can you tell people a little bit more about where to to find you and, and just remind you about your book again.

And I am a huge fan of that book, and that's why I always love chatting with you. I think it's extremely informative. One of the most on the topic of sugar.

So if you're interested, I think everyone should check that book out. Thank you. Yeah, the book is, sugar proof, which is available, 1804 minutes where the books are sold.

And, our website, Sugar Proof kids.com. We have more recipes and tips on the website and then on Instagram you can follow us sugar proof kids. So we're constantly putting out new information to try and, get information out there and try and get parents to kind of, as you kind of said, like gradually make small changes.

You know, I think it's can be overwhelming, but any small step you can do it will have an impact. Yeah. And for the parents who are watching this that like research and data, you know, you're not in it for the influencing.

You're in it for the information. And you're coming from, a highly scientific, highly educated background. And so for the for the individuals that really like that style, then, you know, there's nobody better that I know than you when it comes to talking about about this topic.

So, you know, I appreciate you being here. And spreading the message and yeah, I hope, I hope you can clone yourself, like 50 times and maybe we'll get somewhere.

Doing the best I can. Yeah. All right. Well, thank you for being here. And I think. Thank you for all you're doing. As well, getting the word, appreciated.

Palos Verdes. Very helpful. Thank you. Okay.