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Sugar and Anxiety: The Relationship



Lifestyle changes are one of the keys to overcoming anxiety, and diet plays a significant role in a person's lifestyle. That's why many wonder whether or not sugar causes anxiety, and if cutting out sugar has the potential to fight anxiety symptoms. This article explores the relationship between sugar and anxiety, and how to make sure that your diet that is not causing or contributing to anxiety attacks.

Your Diet and Anxiety

Many health professionals have said that contemporary Western diets are often overloaded with unhealthy

sugars and fats. But anxiety disorders are not likely to be caused by diet alone. Rather, it is believed that a poor diet can trigger or make anxiety symptoms worse by changing the body's functioning and making it harder for the body and mind to cope with stress. That's why those that genuinely want to fight their anxiety may need to look beyond mere dietary changes in order to effectively reduce their anxiety.

Does Sugar Cause Anxiety?

Contrary to what you may have read online, sugar does not cause anxiety. Anxiety is a mental health issue, and it's very uncommon for a person's diet to "cause" anxiety. What sugar does do is create changes in your body that may make your anxiety symptoms worse, or cause feelings that trigger anxiety attacks.

Let's explore the latter.

When you suffer from anxiety attacks, you tend to become hypersensitive to your body. You fear your anxiety attacks, and you notice every single time you feel tired, lightheaded, sick, etc. You notice each and every ache and pain, and you notice when you're not thinking clearly. Every time you notice any of these changes, your anxiety spikes as a result.

Sugar itself doesn't necessarily cause any of these sensations. But sugar does stimulate various sensations in your body. Glucose - and the insulin released to counter glucose - can cause fatigue, trouble thinking, blurry vision and general ill feelings. For those without anxiety, many of these symptoms go unnoticed. But for those with anxiety, each and every one makes you worry that a panic attack is coming, and that fear increases your likelihood of getting one. Furthermore, sugar consumption may leave you with a stomach ache, if you eat too much of it. This experience of physical discomfort can also trigger or worsen your anxiety.

Symptoms of Sugar Rushes

Similarly, sugar rush and withdrawal do have a tendency to mimic some of the physical symptoms of anxiety, like shaking and nervousness. This is linked to the rush of energy that you get as the glucose is broken down in your bloodstream in order to release sharp spikes of energy. For most people, this only occurs after considerable sugar consumption, but depending on what you eat and how long you go before eating again, you may be at risk of over stimulating your body and worsening anxiety if you eat sugar.

These symptoms are not causing anxiety, but if you already have anxiety, the added shaking and tension may make your anxiety worse.

Research Into Sugar and Anxiety

Animal research seems to confirm these ideas. A study in 2008 found that rats that went on a sugar binge and then were deprived of food seemed to have a dopamine imbalance that lead to increased anxiety.

Another study published in 2009 found that long term sugar use seemed more likely to impair memory and reduce the ability to fight anxiety, although the mechanisms of how this happened are unclear. These studies suggest that sugar may affect your ability to cope with anxiety.

What to Do About Anxiety and Blood Sugar

The simple solution is to maintain a healthier diet. A healthier diet will be less prone to symptoms of sugar and insulin imbalances that often lead to panic and anxiety attacks. A healthier diet will also improve your body's ability to cope with stress, and potentially provide you with more energy that you can use to exercise or change your lifestyle in other ways.

What is a healthier diet?

It is a diet that is:

- Free of processed foods (pastas, white bread, microwave meals).
- High in vegetables and moderate quantities of fruit (which contain natural sugar).
- Foods of different colors (carrots, blueberries, kale, strawberries).
- Foods with little to no added sugar.
- Meals that are high in protein, fiber, minerals like magnesium, and fatty acids.

Cutting down on refined sugars is important for overall health, and while it won't have a significant impact on your anxiety, minor changes can add up over time. The healthier your body feels, the more you'll feel good on the whole, and the easier it will be for you to manage your anxiety.

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