

When food producers reduce sugar content, many buyers opt for sweeter alternatives

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American consumers have failed to fully embrace products with less added sugar despite the clear health benefits, according to a new study led by a researcher at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The study is believed to be the most comprehensive accounting to date of the

evolution of sugar content and intake in the U.S. The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Agribusiness*.

Christian Rojas, professor of resource economics at UMass Amherst, found that when [food producers](#) reduced the sugar in their products by an average of 52.8% between 2007 and 2015, most consumers gravitated toward sweeter alternatives, and [sugar intake](#) dropped by only 15.6% during that period.

Rojas and co-author Ezgi Cengiz, an economist at North Carolina State University, also revealed that the products most likely to be reformulated included sweetened beverages, desserts and candies—items that often receive scrutiny from policymakers and health experts.

"These reformulation efforts preceded more recent policies to curb sugar intake, such as taxes on sodas and other sweetened beverages in some jurisdictions," Rojas notes. "We find evidence that reformulation may have occurred too quickly, prompting consumers to seek sweeter alternatives with a more familiar taste."

The research also documents a growing disparity in diet quality among certain demographic groups. Hispanic households, households with children and households with unmarried adults saw greater reductions in sugar intake, while lower income and Black households tended to switch to more sugary items when products were reformulated, even when items containing less sugar were readily available.

To reach their findings, Rojas and Cengiz analyzed more than 680,000 barcoded items and the retail purchases of more than 60,000 households in 2007 and 2015. In the first year of the study, they found that the median U.S. household sourced 16.6% of its calories from added sugars. Eight years later, that share had dropped to 14.2%.

Leading health organizations recommend that sugar should make up no more than 10% of total caloric intake, given its role in a range of health issues from obesity and [high blood pressure](#) to diabetes and tooth decay.

While the study concludes that food manufacturers should continue to reformulate their products to make them more healthful, it suggests policymakers should focus more on improving the eating choices of consumers, particularly those in the most vulnerable populations. One possible policy solution would be to earmark revenues from taxes on sugary foods for educational programs targeting these populations.

"Much of the work on sugar intake has looked at how consumers may be reacting to increased awareness about the detrimental effects of sugar consumption. Much less is known about what is happening on the supply side," Rojas says. "We are currently working on a project that looks at whether product sizes of sugary products have also registered a decline, which would also be a welcome reformulation effort."

Rojas and Cengiz reached similar findings in recent research on sodium intake. However, while the human body requires a certain amount of salt to function, sugar has zero nutritional value.

More information: Ezgi Cengiz et al, Are food manufacturers reducing sugar content? Evidence from scanner data, *Agribusiness* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/agr.21920](https://doi.org/10.1002/agr.21920)

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