New reports spark debate on refined sugars in savoury foods

One lump or twelve?

After a much desired Easter break, with plenty of chocolate consumed in a more than average quantity, sugar has become the hot topic of debate to hit the headlines; but it’s not the chocolate that has highlighted this fresh concern.

A controversial New York Times Sunday magazine cover story on Sugar Twice? has proposed that sugar, in all its sweetness, may actually be toxic, and there are even suggestions that it could be as dangerous as cigarettes and alcohol.

But how much is too much? And is the source of the sugar important? Figures demonstrate that sugar consumption in the UK has increased by more than a third since the 1980s and even though people are consciously putting less sugar on their cereals or in their tea, many are being caught unaware by the secret sugars that are hidden even in the most savoury of foods.

The extent of the secret sugar problem has recently been discovered by BBC Scotland Health Correspondent Eleanor Bradford, who after giving up refined sugar for Lent became increasingly aware of the hidden sugar content in almost every food; including bread, mayonnaise and even crumpets!

Dentists are becoming increasingly concerned about the amount of sugar people are consuming, and dentist Kieran Fallon, a spokesman for the British Dental Association, expressed his concerns about the effect of sugar consumption: “As dental students we were always made aware of hidden sugars. People should look at the breakdown of percentages per serving: Putting it in perspective five grams = one teaspoon of sugar.

“For an alternative snack eat whole fruit, not pulped fruit as this releases sugars. Also giving dried fruit to children between mealtimes can be just as bad because when fruit is dried the sugar becomes concentrated. Whole cheese, not processed cheeses (especially those that are aimed at children because these contain sugars), can also be recommended.

“With regards to there being hidden sugars in foods I absolutely agree that there is too much. Manufacture’s believe that they have to add flavourings, such as salt and sugar, to their products to make them attractive. Even cooking sauces have sugar, which means that what you are eating isn’t as healthy as you think.”

Chief Executive of the British Dental Health Foundation, Dr Nigel Carter, said: “For many years dentists have recognised the large amounts of sugar in many foods where it is often added as a cheap bulking agent.

“Looking for hidden sugars often listed as sucrose, maltose, glucose, fructose etc can help the public cut down on how often they have sugary foods and drinks and help with both dental health and obesity.”

A spokesperson from The Sugar Bureau said: “A reappraisal of data from two dietary surveys of British school children, 1985 (Department of Health) and 1997 (National Diet and Nutrition Survey), found while BMI increased 2-3kg, there was no significant change in total sugars intake over that period.

“In this study key sources of sugars in the diet did change with a marked shift away from table sugar and milk, biscuits and cakes, counterbalanced by a significant increase in soft drinks and, to a lesser extent, fruit juice and breakfast cereals.

“The authors of this paper concluded that reduced energy expenditure, rather than dietary factors, is more likely to be a cause of increased BMI’s recorded in children over this time.”

“The amount of sugars consumed is not considered the primary dietary factor associated with carries development. According to the most recent review of the scientific evidence by EFSA (2010) caries development related to consumption of sucrose and other cariogenic carbohydrates does not depend only on the amount of sugar consumed, but is also influenced by oral hygiene, exposure to fluoride, frequency of consumption, and various other factors.”