

ADDED SUGAR IN THE CANADIAN FOOD SUPPLY: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

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RBA participated in designing the study, developing the research questions, conducting the analyses, and writing the initial draft of the document. LV and DH participated in designing the study methods, and developing the research questions. EPH participated in acquiring the data. All authors participated in editing the document, and have read and approved the final document.

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60**32 ABSTRACT**

33 **BACKGROUND:** Excess consumption of added sugars has been associated with a variety of health
34 problems, but there is little information available characterizing added sugar in the Canadian food
35 supply. This study examined the presence and types of added sugars in the Canadian packaged food
36 supply.

37 **METHODS:** Our study analyzed a comprehensive database of food product information from a major
38 national grocery retailer. We searched the ingredients lists of over 40,000 packaged food products
39 available for sale in March 2015 for a variety of added sugar terms. Proportions of food products
40 containing added sugar were identified overall and within food product categories. Differences in total
41 sugar content were identified between food products with and without added sugar.

42 **RESULTS:** Overall, 66% of the packaged food products analyzed contained at least one added sugar.
43 The added sugar term ‘sugar’ (and its variations) appeared the most frequently, followed by ‘dextrose’.
44 Added sugar presence and total sugar content varied within many product categories, but were
45 consistently higher in expected categories such as ‘Beverages’. Mean total sugar content was
46 significantly higher in products with added sugar than in those without, both overall ($p<0.0001$) and
47 within most product subcategories ($p<0.01$).

48 **INTERPRETATION:** Approximately two thirds of the current Canadian packaged food supply
49 contains added sugar, similar to recent patterns estimated for the US food supply. This study provides a
50 baseline characterization of added sugar in the Canadian food supply, which can be used to assess
51 outcomes of future changes to sugar labeling policies in Canada.

52 INTRODUCTION

53 Added sugar has emerged as an important public health issue. The term “added sugar” generally refers
54 to sugars (or ingredients that functionally substitute for sugars) that are added to foods and beverages
55 during preparation or processing, unlike intrinsic sugars that are found within the structure of intact
56 fruits and vegetables, or sugars naturally occurring in milk.^{1,2} Higher intakes of added sugars threaten
57 the nutrient quality of diets by replacing essential nutrients and increasing the overall energy density of
58 diets.³ There is a growing body of evidence indicating that excess added sugar consumption is
59 associated with a variety of health problems, including heart disease,^{4,5,6} stroke,⁶ obesity,^{7,8,9,10,11}
60 diabetes,^{12,13,14,15,16} high blood cholesterol,^{17,18} cancer,¹⁹ and dental caries.²⁰ The World Health
61 Organization recommends reducing intake of free sugars to below 10% of total energy intake, and to
62 less than 5% for additional health benefits.²¹ Similarly, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada
63 recommends individuals to limit their consumption of added sugars to a maximum of 10% of total daily
64 calorie intake, as do the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans in the United States.^{22,23}

65
66 An increasing proportion of the food supply is categorized as processed and packaged foods,²⁴ which
67 tend to be high in added sugars.²⁵ Worldwide, daily per capita consumption of caloric sweetener (a
68 term which excludes sugars added from fruit juice) increased by 74 calories from 1962 to 2000.²⁶
69 Limited data are available on Canadians’ added sugar consumption, but it has been estimated to fall
70 between 11 and 13% of total energy intake.^{27,28} To date, there is little information about the levels of
71 added sugar content in the food supply in general. A recent study by Popkin and Hawkes examined
72 added sugar in the US, and found that 68% of packaged food and beverages purchased in 2013
73 contained added sugars, after excluding low-calorie sweeteners.²⁹ To our knowledge, there are
74 currently no estimates of the added sugar levels in the Canadian food supply. The primary objective of
75 the current study was to examine the presence and types of added sugars in the Canadian food supply
76 through an analysis of a comprehensive database of food product information from a major national
77 grocery retailer in Canada. In particular, the study sought to estimate the proportion of packaged food
78 products with added sugar both overall and by food category, identify the frequency of different types
79 of added sugars, and identify differences in total sugar content between food products with and without
80 added sugar.

82 METHODS

83 Design

1
2 84 The study analysed a comprehensive database containing food product information of over 60,000
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4 85 items available for sale in March 2015 across all banner stores of a major national grocery retailer. The
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6 86 data provided UPC information, food product categories, product descriptions, Nutrition Facts table
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8 87 information, and the ingredients lists of each food product. For the purposes of this study, only
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10 88 packaged foods were included in the analysis. Products identified as fresh fruits or vegetables, fresh
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12 89 meat, raw ingredients (water, baking ingredients, coffee and tea, fats and oils, etc.), or non-food items
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14 90 (natural health products, nutrition and protein supplements, etc.) were excluded. After exclusions,
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16 91 40,829 packaged food products were analyzed in the current study.
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18 93 To assess the comprehensiveness of the set of food products included in this database, we compared the
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20 94 UPCs of the 40,829 products to supermarket transaction data recorded in the period of March 1 to 15,
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22 95 2015. Over 150 million sales transactions were recorded in the retailers' stores across Canada over this
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24 96 two-week period, and included 60,563 unique UPCs. The results of this comparison indicated that 58%
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26 97 of the products analyzed in this paper were sold in the first two weeks of March. Of the 42% of
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28 98 products not sold in the first two weeks of March, most were likely to be seasonal or infrequently sold
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30 99 food items. The March sales transaction data also included 26,711 UPC codes that were not among the
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32 100 40,829 food products analyzed in this paper. The majority of these were non-food items (51%) or
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34 101 discontinued products (9%). The remaining were products for which nutritional information had not yet
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36 102 been provided (37%).
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38 104 **Measures**

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40 105 The 40,829 food products were sorted into 10 categories (Milk and Dairy; Protein Foods; Mixed
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42 106 Dishes; Grains; Baked Goods; Snacks and Sweets; Beverages; Condiments, Sauces and Spreads; Infant
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44 107 Formula and Baby Food; Fruits and Vegetables) and 30 subcategories, as seen in Table 1. These
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46 108 categories were adapted from those used in the What We Eat in America dietary intake component of
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48 109 the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).³⁰
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50 111 There is varying terminology used to describe sugars in the literature.³¹ Traditionally, the term “added
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52 112 sugars” refers to all sugars added to foods, including honey and syrups, but does not necessarily include
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54 113 fruit juices.³¹ The World Health Organization has adopted the term “free sugars” with the intention of
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56 114 creating a more precise definition, and define it as “all monosaccharides and disaccharides added to
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58 115 foods by the manufacturer, cook or consumer, plus sugars naturally present in honey, syrups and fruit
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3 116 juices”.³² The World Health Organization’s definition for free sugars was used to identify added sugars
4 117 in the current study. We searched for 30 different added sugar terms in the ingredients lists of the food
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6 118 products: agave, malt/barley malt, cane juice, caramel, carob, corn sweetener, corn syrup, date paste,
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8 119 dextran, dextrose, diatase, ethyl maltol, Florida crystals, fructose, fruit juice concentrate, galactose,
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10 120 glucose, glucose-fructose, high fructose corn syrup, honey, lactose, maltodextrin, maltose, molasses,
11 121 nectar, panaocha, sucrose, sugar, syrup, and treacle.^{33,34,35} High-level terms such as ‘sugar’ or ‘syrup’
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13 122 contained multiple varieties of added sugars (e.g. “icing sugar”, “grape sugar”, “raw sugar”; “rice
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15 123 syrup”, “golden syrup”). Terms more commonly recognized on their own, such as “corn syrup”, were
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17 124 included in independent categories. The search method accounted for sugars with overlapping names,
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19 125 such as “fructose” and “high-fructose corn syrup”, and excluded unwanted non-sugar ingredients that
20 126 might be identified with the search terms, such as “*honeydew melon*” or “*caramelized onions*”. We
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22 127 excluded sugar alcohols such as sorbitol, glycerol and erithritol from our search, as they contain
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24 128 insignificant amounts of energy, as done in previous research.^{29,36}

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27 130 “Total sugar”, as opposed to added sugar, indicates the total grams of sugar in one serving of a food
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29 131 product, including added, intrinsic, and milk sugars.² We identified total sugar using an existing
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31 132 variable in the database that provided grams of sugar per serving, as listed on the products’ Nutrition
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33 133 Facts tables.

34 134 35 36 135 **Statistical Analysis**

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38 136 This study utilized ‘COUNTIF’ functions in Excel 2013 to search for each added sugar term, including
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40 137 searches for variations in spelling and punctuation. The researchers used SPSS statistics software
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42 138 (version 22.0; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA; 2014) to perform descriptive statistics (counts, means,
43 139 standard deviations, and proportions) and to conduct t-tests to analyze significant differences in total
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45 140 sugar between products with and without added sugars.

46 47 141 48 49 142 **RESULTS**

50 143 Overall, 66% of the 40,829 packaged food products contained at least one added sugar in their
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52 144 ingredients list.

53 54 145 55 56 146 **Types of added sugars**

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3 147 Table 2 displays the frequency and proportion at which each different added sugar term appeared in the
4 148 products examined. The most common added sugar term was 'sugar', identified in 54% of all food
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6 149 products analyzed. The next five most frequently appearing terms (dextrose, glucose, glucose-fructose,
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8 150 corn syrup, and maltodextrin) were found in 45% of all food products, collectively. The terms
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10 151 'dextran', 'diatase', 'Florida crystals', 'galactose', and 'panocha' were also included in the search
11 152 strategy as potential added sugars, but they did not appear in any of the food products analysed.
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14 15 154 **Sugar content**

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17 155 Table 1 displays the mean amount of total sugar present in products by subcategory. Overall, products
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19 156 in the 'Beverages' category contained the highest mean levels of total sugar levels. The 'Milk and
20 157 Dairy' and 'Snacks and Sweets' categories were highly variable in the total sugar levels across their
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22 158 subcategories. 'Condiments, Sauces and Spreads', 'Infant Formula and Baby Food', and 'Fruits and
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24 159 Vegetables' contained the next highest levels of total sugar. The remaining categories of 'Protein
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26 160 Foods', 'Mixed Dishes', 'Grains' and 'Baked Goods' all contained relatively lower levels of total
27 161 sugars in comparison to the other categories.
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31 163 Table 1 also displays the proportion of the foods in each subcategory that contained at least one added
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33 164 sugar in their ingredients list, according to the search method. These results followed a similar pattern
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35 165 to the mean total sugar described previously, with high proportions of added sugar in categories with
36 166 high total sugar. Some notable exceptions included the 'cured meats', 'soups', 'pizza', 'Mexican', and
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38 167 'breads' subcategories, in which a high proportion of the products contained added sugar, but the mean
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40 168 total sugar content was relatively low.
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42 169 43 170 **Total sugar in products with and without added sugar**

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45 171 Table 1 presents the mean amount of total sugar found in products identified as having added sugar and
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47 172 in those without, by subcategory. The overall mean total sugar in products with added sugar was
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49 173 significantly higher than the overall total sugar in products without added sugar, at 11.0 g and 2.9 g
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51 174 respectively ($t = -80.830$; $p < 0.0001$). There were also significant differences in total sugar content
52 175 between products with and without added sugar within each of the subcategories ($p < 0.01$ in all cases),
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54 176 with the exception of 'pizza' ($p = 0.75$) and 'Mexican' ($p = 0.95$) subcategories.
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2 178 The search strategy resulted in 2,311 food products that contained “0 g” of total sugar per serving, but
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4 179 were identified as having at least one added sugar in their ingredients list. This discrepancy may be
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6 180 primarily explained by the fact that Canada’s Nutrition Facts table guidelines allow manufacturers to
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8 181 list total sugar as 0 g if one serving of the food product contains less than 0.5 g of total sugar.³⁷
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11 183 **INTERPRETATION**

13 184 The results of the current study indicate that approximately two-thirds of the packaged food products
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15 185 sold in a major Canadian supermarket retailer contain added sugar. These results are comparable to
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17 186 estimates reported by Popkin and Hawkes in the US, and suggest a high level of consistency in added
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19 187 sugar presence across the North American food supply.²⁹ The retailer analyzed in this study commands
20 188 approximately one third of the Canadian supermarket market share, serving a large proportion of
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22 189 shoppers in this country. Given the company’s widespread permeation across Canada, it is reasonable
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24 190 to argue that the sample of over 40,000 food products analyzed in this study is a realistic representation
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26 191 of the entire Canadian packaged food supply.

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29 193 The added sugar term most commonly identified in ingredients lists (“sugar” and its variations) may be
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31 194 familiar to consumers, but numerous lesser-known terms also appear frequently, which consumers may
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33 195 not recognize as added sugars. This diverse terminology may pose a challenge for consumers trying to
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35 196 identify whether or not a product contains added sugar. The presence of added sugar was highest in the
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37 197 expected food products including candy, sweet bakery products, and soda, but was also very high in
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39 198 food products that many consumers choose as “healthy” options, such as snack bars, cereal, and juice.
40 199 Mean amounts of total sugar were highest in similar food categories to those that had a high presence
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42 200 of added sugar. Foods that contain added sugar tend to have significantly higher total sugar contents
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44 201 than those without added sugar. Some exceptions to this observation were the ‘pizza’ and ‘Mexican’
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46 202 food product categories, both of which had very high proportions of products containing added sugar,
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48 203 but relatively low mean total sugar contents. These discrepancies indicate that while the majority of the
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50 204 products in those food categories do contain added sugar, the average amount of added and intrinsic
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52 205 sugars across those products is very small.

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54 207 There is little known about consumers’ level of knowledge and awareness of added sugars in food
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56 208 products. However, evidence does suggest consumers have several misunderstandings about sugars and
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58 209 sugar processing, including confusion about the safest ways to consume sugars in a healthy diet, and
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2 210 the belief that sugar content of fruit juice is less of a health risk than soft drinks.³⁸ Further, around one-
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4 211 quarter of young people cannot identify if there is added sugar present in a food item when there is no
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6 212 added sugar information on Nutrition Facts tables.³⁹ In an effort to address the confusion over added
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8 213 sugars, the US has recently finalized updates to their Nutrition Facts label that include requirements to
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10 214 distinguish between intrinsic and added sugars, with a percent daily value (%DV) for added sugars
11 215 based on the USDA recommendation that they not exceed 10% of total daily calories.⁴⁰ Health Canada
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13 216 has also recently considered the addition of an added sugar value on Nutrition Facts tables, as well as a
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15 217 reorganization of the ingredients list that would group all sugars together in a set of brackets, which
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17 218 may aid consumers in finding and reading added sugars in the list of ingredients.^{41,42}
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20 220 **Limitations and Strengths**

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22 221 The products in this study come from the largest food retailer in Canada across of a range of
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24 222 supermarket “banners”; however, the data does not include products from other retailers. Additionally,
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26 223 the food product data used in this study were not linked with supermarket transaction data, therefore
27 224 the results reflect what is available for purchase rather than sales weighted data on consumer
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29 225 purchasing behaviours. Despite these limitations, the product database analyzed in the current paper
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31 226 represents the largest database of pre-packaged foods in Canada of which we are aware.
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34 228 Not all of the products in the food database were sold within a two-week period for which sales data
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36 229 was available. However, there were no substantial differences between the presence of added sugar in
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38 230 the 40,829 products analyzed (66.0% containing added sugar) and in the portion of those that were
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40 231 verified as sold within March 1 to 15, 2015 (67.2% containing added sugar). The decision to include all
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42 232 products reported in the food database (as opposed to only those sold during the two-week period) is
43 233 that it provides a more comprehensive analysis of seasonal and non-seasonal products that may not be
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45 234 captured in sales transactions over a single two-week time period.
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48 236 The number of different ways in which added sugar is reported as an ingredient represents an additional
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50 237 challenge. Efforts were undertaken to include all relevant ingredients; however, the search strategy may
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52 238 have overlooked some new or rare terms for added sugar.
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55 240 **Conclusions**

1
2 241 A high proportion of pre-packaged foods in Canada contain added sugar. The current findings
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4 242 underscore the prevalence of added sugar in the Canadian food supply, as well as the difficulty of
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6 243 identifying added sugar content, which requires a detailed understanding of the many ways in which
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8 244 added sugar is reported as an ingredient. In the absence of requirements to report added sugar levels in
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10 245 nutrition labels, Canadian consumers lack the information necessary to act on public health
11 246 recommendations to limit added sugar consumption.
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357 TABLES

358 Table 1. Total Sugar and Added Sugar by Food Product Subcategory

	Mean TS g (s.d.)	Proportion with AS %	TS among those without AS g (s.d.)	TS among those with AS g (s.d.)	Difference in TS g
MILK & DAIRY					
All Milk & Cream	12.5 (8.9)	32.5	10.4 (4.3)	17.0 (13.3)	6.6
Dairy drinks & substitutes	7.9 (6.4)	63.1	3.4 (5.2)	10.5 (5.5)	7.1
Cheese	0.7 (1.9)	10.7	0.4 (1.6)	2.6 (2.8)	2.2
Yogurt	14.2 (7.8)	73.8	6.1 (3.9)	17.1 (6.7)	11
PROTEIN FOODS					
Red meat & poultry	2.4 (3.8)	68.2	0.6 (1.2)	3.2 (4.3)	2.6
Fish & Seafood	1.0 (1.9)	43.9	0.1 (0.5)	2.2 (2.2)	2.1
Cured meats	0.7 (1.8)	85.0	0.3 (2.3)	0.8 (1.7)	0.5
Canned fish/meats	0.8 (4.2)	30.5	0.1 (0.4)	2.5 (7.4)	2.4
Plant-based Protein Foods ^a	2.7 (4.0)	20.6	1.8 (2.2)	6.1 (6.5)	4.3
MIXED DISHES					
Soups	3.0 (3.8)	78.2	2.1 (4.4)	3.3 (3.5)	1.2
Pizza	3.5 (2.1)	98.5	*	3.5 (2.2)	---
Mexican	2.0 (1.4)	75.6	2.0 (1.7)	2.0 (1.3)	0.0
Frozen dinners/entrees	5.9 (7.3)	74.2	2.7 (2.6)	7.1 (8.1)	4.4
Other mixed dishes	4.9 (6.4)	71.4	2.0 (2.2)	6.0 (7.1)	4.0
GRAINS					
Cereals ^b	8.3 (5.4)	85.7	1.2 (2.8)	9.5 (4.8)	8.3
Grains ^c	1.4 (2.5)	17.2	1.2 (2.4)	2.5 (2.9)	1.3
BAKED GOODS					
Breads ^d	2.2 (2.6)	70.6	0.8 (1.5)	2.8 (2.8)	2.0
SNACKS & SWEETS					
Savory snacks	2.6 (4.7)	53.5	1.0 (2.7)	3.9 (5.5)	2.9
Crackers	1.7 (2.6)	68.9	0.5 (1.3)	2.3 (2.8)	1.8
Snack/meal bars	10.3 (3.8)	99.4	*	10.4 (3.8)	---
Sweet bakery products	14.1 (9.0)	97.7	2.0 (3.7)	14.4 (8.9)	12.4
Candy	18.1 (9.0)	97.6	6.0 (8.6)	18.4 (8.8)	12.4
Other desserts	14.9 (7.3)	96.3	3.1 (4.6)	15.4 (7.0)	12.3
BEVERAGES					
Juice	22.0 (10.6)	79.3	15.9 (12.0)	23.6 (9.6)	7.7
Pop/Soda, Iced teas	26.5 (18.0)	76.8	0.5 (3.2)	34.3 (12.4)	33.8
Sports drinks, energy drinks, flavoured water	21.4 (18.0)	78.1	3.5 (7.5)	26.5 (16.9)	23.0
Beverage mixes & crystals	17.0 (4.4)	95.8	*	17.4 (4.0)	---
CONDIMENTS, SAUCES & SPREADS					
Condiments, sauces & spreads ^e	5.7 (7.8)	73.1	2.7 (7.3)	6.8 (7.7)	4.1
INFANT FORMULA & BABY FOOD					

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3	Infant formula & baby food	6.9 (6.0)	47.7	5.8 (5.7)	8.0 (6.1)	2.2
4	FRUITS & VEGETABLES					
5	Fruits & vegetables ^f	9.6 (13.4)	34.8	7.6 (14.4)	13.2 (10.2)	5.6
6	(Packaged/Processed)					

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8 360 AS, Added Sugar; TS, Total Sugar.

9 361 *Categories contain a negligible total (≤ 5 food products)10 362 ^a Includes beans, peas, legumes, nuts, seeds, and processed soy products.11 363 ^b Includes all hot and cold cereals.12 364 ^c Includes products such as pasta and rice.13 365 ^d Includes all varieties of bread products such as rolls, wraps and pitas.14 366 ^e Includes a wide variety of products such as jams, syrups, toppings, honey, gravy and salsa.15 367 ^f Includes only packaged or processed fruit and vegetable products, such as canned fruits and vegetables, dried
16 368 packaged fruits, and applesauce-type fruit snacks.

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369 **Table 2.** Frequency of Different Added Sugars (N=40,829)

Added Sugar	Total Number of products	% All Products	% Products with added sugar
Sugar (all other)	21869	54%	81%
Dextrose	4892	12%	18%
Glucose	3847	9%	14%
Glucose-Fructose	3555	9%	13%
Corn Syrup	3181	8%	12%
Maltodextrin	3015	7%	11%
Fruit Juice Concentrate	2278	6%	9%
Honey	1596	4%	6%
Molasses	1486	4%	6%
Syrup (all other)	1177	3%	4%
Lactose	885	2%	3%
Fructose	742	2%	3%
Cane Juice	706	2%	3%
Malt/Barley Malt	400	1%	2%
High-Fructose Corn Syrup	361	1%	1%
Caramel	302	1%	1%
Agave	190	1%	1%
Sucrose	125	<1%	1%
Date Paste	40	<1%	<1%
Maltose	27	<1%	<1%
Carob	10	<1%	<1%
Treacle	7	<1%	<1%
Ethyl Maltol	6	<1%	<1%
Corn Sweetener	4	<1%	<1%
Nectar (other than agave)	4	<1%	<1%
Dextran	0	0%	0%
Diatase	0	0%	0%
Florida Crystals	0	0%	0%
Galactose	0	0%	0%
Panocha	0	0%	0%

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