

Sugar-free for thirty **[WUNT December 2008]**

Hello, my name is Michelle and I'm a Sugar-holic. My drug of choice is chocolate, but really anything sweet will do. My habit is daily, usually after every meal. My sugar stash is endless, you'll find candy in every drawer.

My name is Michelle and it's been over thirty days since my last cupcake.

A month ago I gave up refined sugar and everything containing it. This, like many of my major life decisions, all started with a book, specifically *Skinny Bitch*. Like *Fast Food Nation* and *The Food Revolution* before it, *Bitch* sets out to reveal to the public the deep dark secrets behind the food we eat. While the book's main focus is promoting an organic, vegan lifestyle, there is an entire chapter dedicated to the evils of refined sugar. Now don't hate me, but at 5'2" and around 105 pounds, my sugar habit has never really caused me much concern. On the contrary, without any vain motives to discontinue use, I've often over-indulged in an attempt to prove to skeptics that I do in fact eat. Aside from a few too many cavities over the years, I saw no harm in pacifying my sweet tooth with candied treasures. That is, until I read *Bitch*.

Let's start with the basics: sugar = empty calories. We've all heard that before right? So let's go further: the reason sugar is empty is due to the refining process which strips this natural substance of all its vitamins, minerals, enzymes, calcium, protein... basically anything you'd actually want to put in your body. It doesn't stop there either; because sugar and vitamins are often drawn into the blood the same way, too much sugar can actually crowd out the good stuff. Therefore, not only are you consuming empty calories, but you are essentially eating a substance that is sucking out your nutrients before you have a chance to benefit from them. Not to mention the fact that sugar consumption has been linked to hypoglycemia, weakened immune systems, ADD, liver disease, kidney disease, depression, mental disorders, and the accelerated growth of cancer cells.

Still want that cookie? If your answer's yes, I don't blame you. No matter how scary the statistics, it's still easy to shrug off the numbers. After all, everything is bad for us these days and it's hard to determine which arguments to believe. That's why I had to experience the difference for myself. So for thirty days I cut out all refined sugar as well as its less healthy cousin: high-fructose corn syrup. One month, no dessert, no candy, and a *lot* of reading labels. It's astonishing the amount of sugar that's hidden in the least likely foods. Throughout the course of the month, I found sugar in my Lean Pockets, Wheat Thins, bread, and, on one occasion, frozen vegetables. Miracle Whip, my condiment of choice, contains both sugar AND corn syrup. This was my Achilles heel for the entire project and the first thing I reached for on day thirty-one.

From week one of this experiment, I learned that sugar truly is a drug. It effects the

chemicals in your brain and, over time, you develop a dependency. There's a Princeton study of lab rats who, when subjected to cycles of binging and withdrawal from sugar, experienced teeth chattering, shaking, and changes in brain chemistry. I, on the other hand, experienced what felt like an entire week of the flu. Headaches, sleeplessness, runny nose, and general fatigue were among my withdrawal symptoms, but by far the most annoying symptom was the persistent presence of phlegm in my throat. This, coupled with dry mouth lead to the ingestion of more water per day than I thought humanly possible. In short, week one was not fun.

By the end of the first week however, I noticed the first advantage of a sugarless existence: good skin. According to dermatologist Fredric Brandt, sugar effects circulation by decreasing the blood vessel's expansion abilities. Not only that, but it also attacks the skin's collagen and decreases tissue resilience, making skin appear saggy and wrinkled. Another dermatologist, Dr. Nicholas Perricone, believes that sugar is one of the main sources of the skin inflammation that causes wrinkles and redness. Perhaps that's why so many Hollywood beauties avoid sugar at all costs. While I didn't notice a dramatic change in my skin overall, I did enjoy the benefit of waking up daily looking toned and well rested, even after drinking 'til 3am the night before. Perhaps the extra collagen cushioned the blow of too little sleep and too many shots?

Vanity aside though, the greatest benefit of cutting out the sweet stuff was found in my bodily health. During the height of flu season, my immune system became unstoppable. As everyone around me came down with sniffles, coughs, and sore throats, I felt like Supergirl. As long as I was sleeping well at night, I was the picture of perfect health. This effect could be from a number of factors. First, sugar suppresses your immune system and reduces the ability of your white blood cells to fight germs. These effects start less than thirty minutes after ingesting sugar and last for as long as five hours. Therefore, in the absence of sugar, my immune system was allowed to thrive. Second, I found that without dessert after every meal to fill me up, I was eating more actual food. With the restrictions on my meal's ingredients list, the food I was eating was usually fresh, healthy and organic. Fruits and vegetables became a daily staple simply because there were no lists to study; I know what's in my apple. And finally, if that didn't whip my health in shape, the gallons of water I downed every day probably did some good as well.

Perhaps the most shocking part of this whole experience is the end result: I'm sticking to it. A month ago I would have told you that by day thirty-one you'd find me holed up in my apartment surrounded by candy bar wrappers with icing on my nose, but after seeing the effects of skipping dessert, I'm much choosier about my sweet treats. I'm not saying I've sworn off sugar forever, it simply must be worth it. I'll trade cheap cookies for good dark chocolate any day...but I'll never trade my Miracle Whip.