



verbraucherzentrale

# PLAYING HIDE-AND-SEEK WITH SUGAR

Summary of the report "Hidden Sweeteners", June 2013

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### ...❖ In a market study, consumer associations expose 70 other terms for sweeteners in foods

Consumer questions like “Why is there 45% sugar in product ‘xy’, even though sugar isn’t in the list of ingredients?” were the reason for trawling through the lists of ingredients in foods looking for “hidden” sweeteners as part of a market study. Sugar is used as an ingredient in foods not just to make them pleasantly sweet, but especially due to its low price and its technological characteristics. Sugar gives structure, acts as a preservative, absorbs water and enhances flavour, thus enabling manufacturers to save on more pricey ingredients, such as fruits in yoghurt. Enquiries to the consumer associations show that even well-informed consumers can’t see through all the tricks, and are deceived by advertising.

#### The market study

In a market study across Germany, the consumer associations surveyed the sweeteners used in 276 processed foods. In addition to sugar, they found 70 further terms for ingredients contributing to sweetening and/or sugar content in the table of nutritional information.

The survey examined fruit products, wheat products, drinks, milk products and ice cream, and confectionery of all types, as well as savoury products.

#### Market study uncovers potential deception

The tricks listed below are generally legal, but exploit the scope for interpretation of laws and regulations.

#### ...❖ The confusion-of-terminology trick

The use of a number of sweeteners with different names often moves sugar (sucrose) away from the top of the ingredients list.

**As a result:** The classic statement that the product is predominantly made up of what is top of the ingredients list is not true in every case – sugar is spread out among many ingredients.

**Example:** A chocolate-covered filled wafer with cereals contains eleven ingredients that contribute to its sugar content (glucose-fructose syrup, glucose syrup, caramelised sugar, maltodextrin, lactose, whey products, sweet whey powder, full milk powder, skimmed milk powder, sugar, sweetened condensed milk), bringing it up to 45.4 g of sugar per 100 g, even though sugar as a separate ingredient is only shown at the lower middle end of the ingredients list.

#### ...❖ “No added sugar” claim

Promotional claims such as “no added sugar” or “unsweetened” give the false impression that a product contains little or no sugar. However, added sugar is not the same as the sugar content of a product. Sweetening ingredients such as dried fruit or whey products provide sugar naturally. In such cases, the information “contains natural sugar” **should** be shown on the packaging, but does not have to be.

**Background:** The nutrition-related statement is based on a definition of sugar that encompasses all monosaccharides and disaccharides, i.e. not just sucrose. There is also creative leeway regarding the reference to ingredients that naturally contain sugar. The statement is not mandatory, nor is it specified where this statement should be made.

**Example:** In the case of cappuccino powder (unsweetened), although no sugar is shown in the ingredients list, the powder nevertheless contains around 40% sugar from the ingredient sweet whey powder. And, even if there is a little star next to the claim “unsweetened” and the explanation for this appears on a different side of the packaging in small type, this does not provide the transparency that the consumer requires.

#### ...❖ The huge-amounts-and-portions tactic

Stating sugar per portion is particularly irritating in the case of drinks if the portion does not correspond to the size of the bottle or can. Particularly in the case of alcohol-free soft drinks in large bottles, the sugar content per bottle very quickly adds up to a sugar content that is far higher than the reference amount for sugar of 90 g<sup>1</sup> per day.

**Background:** The sugar content can also be stated per portion, but the size of a portion is not specified.

**Example:** A lemonade with 3% lemon juice is advertised using the claim “less sweet”, contains “only” 9.7 g of sugar per 100 ml. For a 1.75 litre bottle, that adds up to 170 g of sugar; however, it only states 24.3 g per portion (250 ml).

#### ...❖ Hidden sugar in savoury foods

Even at home, a pinch of sugar enhances the flavour of many dishes, but you certainly wouldn’t use more than two teaspoons in 100 g of coleslaw.

**Background:** Sugar is not just sweet, but also acts as a flavour enhancer and can absorb water – thus reducing the need for expensive ingredients.

**Examples:** The market study found coleslaw with 12% sugar.

<sup>1</sup> Food Labelling Regulation, Annex XIII, Part B

Ketchup with “30% less sugar” contained over 16% sugar and, in an organic ketchup “with apple syrup, without added sugar”, as much as 20%. And if you were to eat a “chicken snack in fruity curry sauce” for lunch, you would have almost 10% sugar on your plate (there are 16 g of sugar in a 175 g portion).

#### ❖ Extra sweetness for youngsters

Children's products are frequently higher in calories than products not promoted for children. And they often contain more sugar.

**Background:** Children quickly get used to the extra portion of sugar; their sugar threshold increases and they forget how good naturally sweet products taste.

**Examples:** Crispbread normally has a sugar content of between 0.5 g and 2 g per 100 g and is therefore low in calories. But that is not the case for the crispbread advertised as “just right as a snack for in-between meals, at nursery or at school”. That weighs in at 36 g of sugar per 100 g, and is thus certainly not a suitable snack for in-between meals. Rusks positioned as a children's product also manage 34.6 g of sugar per 100 g. Normal rusks contain between 3 g and 10 g of sugar per 100 g.

#### ❖ Less is sometimes more

For many consumers, products containing less sugar are “healthier” foods, which is why manufacturers like to advertise a reduced sugar content.

**Background:** If sugar has been reduced by more than 30% compared with other products in the same category, this can be used as a claim. However, there is creative leeway in the choice of equivalent products.

**Example:** A fruit spread claimed it had “40% less sugar\* (\*than jam)”. Comparing it with others on the shelf, however, there were other fruit spreads with a similar or lower sugar content entirely without promotional wording.

#### ❖ Sweeteners don't necessarily make it lighter

The sugar and calorie content can be reduced through the use of sweeteners. Nevertheless, there are products that have not been reformulated<sup>2</sup> that are “naturally” less calorific.

**Background:** If cheap products are produced, a greater use of sugar helps to save on expensive raw materials – sugar also provides structure and enhances flavour. Sweeteners cannot replace these technological functions – other ingredients need to be used that add more calories.

**Example:** A Wellness strawberry fruit spread claims

to be “only with the sweetness of fruits and stevia (with steviol glycosides from stevia) – 30% fewer calories”. However, with 38.3 g of sugar and 161 kcal per 100 g, it had both more sugar and more calories than a mango fruit spread from another manufacturer with 34.8 g of sugar and 152 kcal per 100 g, which, even without sweeteners, is lower in sugar and calories but, as a result, has a higher fruit content.



#### Misleading and deceiving consumers is prohibited by law – what actions are needed?

(More detailed conclusions/requirements can be found in the market study report.)

- ❖ Harmonising the various sugar definitions in the legislation.
- ❖ Products with a high sugar content should not be permitted to be promoted as particularly suitable for children.
- ❖ Nutritional claims must be made in a way that they can be quickly understood and evaluated by consumers – consumers want traffic light labelling.
- ❖ No advertising such as “no added sugar” or “unsweetened” if ingredients have been used that add to the sugar content.
- ❖ Food monitoring agencies must take stronger action against misleading claims.

#### ❖ Consumer tip

**Pay attention to ingredients and nutritional labelling – root out hidden sweeteners.**

**Critically question advertising – compare food products.**

<sup>2</sup> Reformulation: Optimising a recipe with the aim of reducing items such as sugar and fat in foods

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