

4 Things to Know About High Fructose Corn Syrup

High fructose corn syrup (HFCS) has been making headlines for years—and usually not in a positive light. Often used as a replacement for cane sugar in sodas, candies, and other sweet snacks, it's frequently viewed as the “less healthy” option. For coaches working with young athletes, it may be confusing to balance the claims against HFCS and the idea that it is a quick fuel source for performance. How should you talk about HFCS? And what should you offer at practices or competitions?

Registered dietitian and [TrueSport Expert](#), Stephanie Miezin, MS, RD, CSSD, breaks down what's currently known about high fructose corn syrup and how coaches can help athletes make informed choices.

1. Understand What High Fructose Corn Syrup Actually Is

Despite its scientific-sounding name, high fructose corn syrup is simply another form of sugar. It's made by breaking down corn starch into glucose and then converting part of that glucose into fructose. The result is a sweet syrup that's been widely used in U.S. food production since the 1970s because it's cheaper than imported sugar.

“Fructose and glucose are simple sugars naturally found in fruits, vegetables, and honey,” explains Miezin. “They're also present in table sugar. The name ‘high fructose corn syrup’ makes it sound like it's packed with fructose, but it's actually a mix—typically about 55% fructose and 45% glucose. For comparison, table sugar is roughly 50-50.”

In other words, HFCS and table sugar are more alike than many assume. “People often think HFCS is much ‘worse’ than sugar, but their compositions are very similar,” says Miezin.

2. The Real Problem Is Overconsumption, Not the Ingredient Itself

There's no strong evidence showing that HFCS alone causes poor health outcomes. The issue arises from how and where it's typically found—in [highly processed foods](#) like sodas, candies, and snacks that are easy to overconsume.

“When we look at large-scale studies, HFCS appears linked with health problems,” Miezin notes. “But those findings reflect overall dietary patterns, not necessarily the syrup itself. Diets high in HFCS are often high in sugar and excess calories in general, which can lead to weight gain and other issues.”

She also points out that research shows diets rich in fructose don't automatically lead to negative outcomes—unless total calories are excessive. The harm stems from eating too much overall, not from the sugar molecule itself.

3. Be Wary of “Natural” or “No High Fructose Corn Syrup” Labels

Food marketing can be misleading. Some companies now advertise products as “free from high fructose corn syrup,” [implying they’re healthier](#). But if those products still contain large amounts of sugar from other sources, the health impact is roughly the same.

In the U.S., there is growing pressure to restrict the use of HFCS in certain drinks, but that wouldn’t necessarily mean your favorite soda will become a health drink. “Whether it uses cane sugar or HFCS, soda will still be soda,” says Miezin. “The total amount of sugar—and the nutrition profile—won’t change.”

4. There’s a Time and Place for All Types of Sugar

Not all sugar is bad—especially for young athletes. In fact, simple sugars play an important role in athletic performance. “Instead of fixating on a single ingredient, look at the product as a whole,” Miezin suggests. Think about the ingredient list, overall nutrition profile, and when it’s being consumed.

For example, fruit snacks might not be optimal for a sedentary child—but for an athlete, they can serve as an effective pre- or mid-workout energy source. Many sports drinks and snacks use a mix of glucose and fructose to help the body absorb and use energy efficiently.

“It’s important not to demonize fructose,” Miezin adds. “It’s metabolized differently from glucose and doesn’t trigger big spikes in blood sugar or insulin. “If you are concerned about blood glucose spikes for any reason, avoiding fructose in favor of glucose may actually be more detrimental.”

“It’s important for coaches and caregivers to first focus on the big picture,” says Miezin. “Is your athlete [eating a lot of fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, healthy fats, and complex carbohydrates at most meals](#)? Are they eating enough [simple carbohydrates in and around their training](#)? Often, we get hyper-focused on the small things with nutrition and forget about the basics that are really having the biggest impacts on health and performance.”

Takeaway

High fructose corn syrup is not a harmful ingredient in and of itself. Negative health impacts related to consuming HFCS stem from overconsumption of calories. It is wise to limit the amount of highly processed foods where HFCS is typically found and focus on nutrient-dense foods whenever possible. But in the right context, simple sugars like HFCS can be valuable fuel for athletes. Rather than avoiding a specific ingredient, help athletes prioritize whole foods for most meals and use quick-digesting sugars strategically around practices and competitions to refuel and maintain performance.



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