
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Addicted to sugar



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Georgie

And I'm Georgie. Would you like a cup of tea, Neil?

Neil

Oh, yes thanks, Georgie - with milk and three sugars please.

Georgie

Three sugars!? Wow, you really have a **sweet tooth** - you like eating sweet things. Aren't you worried about your weight?

Neil

Yes, but I can't say 'no' to sugar. Just as our addiction to oil is causing a climate emergency, our addiction to sugar is causing a health emergency for our bodies. Sugar gives us an instant hit of the chemical hormone, dopamine, making us feel good, but in the long run causing obesity, tooth decay, and diseases like diabetes.

Georgie

But how did our addiction to the sweet stuff begin? That's what we'll be discussing in this programme and, as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well. Anyway, here's your tea, Neil... I just put one sugar.

Neil

Thanks, Georgie, I'll give it a try. Now before we go on, I have a question for you. Sugar cane, which grows naturally in Asia, Africa and the Americas, first came to England in the 11th century. Back then it was an expensive luxury item, affordable only to kings, queens and the very rich. So, which English monarch loved eating sugar so much their teeth turned black?

Was it:

- a) King Henry VIII?
- b) Queen Elizabeth I? or,
- c) Mary Queen of Scots?

Georgie

I know Henry VIII was very unhealthy, so I'll guess it's him.

Neil

OK, Georgie, we'll find out the answer later in the programme. Just now, I compared sugar to oil as the world's most important **commodity**. A **commodity** is a product or natural resource that can be traded, bought and sold. Today, economies, governments and wars are based on controlling oil, but in earlier centuries, the same was true of sugar.

Georgie

For four hundred years, sugar, along with coffee and tobacco, was grown in slavery plantations and shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. By the time slavery was ended in 1834, the demand for sugar in Europe and the United States was at a record high. Here's professor of international history, Ulba Bosma, explaining more to BBC Radio 4 programme, Thinking Allowed:

Professor Ulbe Bosma

Sugar was already an extremely important commodity in the 16th and 17th and 18th century, and in the 19th century we see a **staggering** growth of sugar consumption in Europe and the United States. And with that, sugar became the **fuel** for human bodies, whereas oil became the fuel for vehicles in the 20th century.

Neil

Professor Bosma talks about the **staggering** growth in the popularity of sugar. The adjective, **staggering**, means shocking or surprising. Just like oil became the fuel for machine engines, sugar became the fuel for the human body. **Fuel** is a substance that is burned to provide heat or power.

Georgie

Trading companies had become rich selling sugar grown using slave labour. When people began to realise the health problems of sugar in the 20th century, these companies needed new ways to sell their product, and began using sugar in food which had previously contained none, food like bread, cereal and yogurt. Here's Professor Bosma again, taking up the story for BBC Radio 4's, Thinking Allowed:

Professor Ulbe Bosma

You can **flood the market** with a certain commodity, with sugar in this case, but that still does not mean that people will consume it, so the **eating habits** of people had to change. People until the early 19th century they had a few spoons of sugar per week, but not a kilo which people consume today in many countries in the world...

Neil

Sugar companies **flooded the market** with their commodity. If you **flood the market**, you make a lot of your product available for sale, often at a low price.

Georgie

But just because something is cheap and easily available, doesn't mean people will eat it. So, sugar companies tried to increase sugar consumption by changing people's **eating habits** – the way a group of people eat, for example which types of food they eat, how much of it, and how often.

Neil

Instead of one or two spoons of sugar per week, people started eating kilos, with results we see around us every day - worldwide, obesity and heart disease have tripled in the last 50 years. What's more, because sugary food is cheaper, it's often the poorest in society who are worst affected.

Georgie

Hmm, maybe it's time to try having your tea without any sugar, eh, Neil? And to reveal the answer to your question: which English monarch's famous love of sugar turned their teeth black? I guessed it was the notorious overeater, Henry VIII...

Neil

Which was... the wrong answer I'm afraid, Georgie. In fact, during the years before toothpaste and dentists, those black stumpy teeth belonged to Queen Elizabeth I. OK, let's recap the vocabulary we've learned from this programme about sugar, starting with a **sweet tooth** – a fondness for eating sweet, sugary food and drinks.

Georgie

A **commodity** is a product or natural resource that can be traded, bought and sold.

Neil

Fuel is a substance such as oil or coal that is burned to provide heat or power.

Georgie

The adjective **staggering** means very shocking and surprising.

Neil

If a company **floods the market**, they release a lot of a particular product for sale, often at a low price.

Georgie

And finally, **eating habits** describe the way a particular group of people eat, for example which types of food they eat, how much and how often. Once again our six minutes are up! Join us again soon for more trending topics and useful vocabulary, here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Neil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

a sweet tooth

a liking for sweet, sugary food and drinks

commodity

product or natural resource that can be traded, bought and sold

staggering

very shocking and surprising

fuel

substance such as oil, coal or wood, that is burned to provide heat or power

flood the market

release a lot of a particular product for sale, often at a low price

eating habits

the way a particular group of people eat, for example which types of food they eat, how much, and how often