

Cereal Has Strayed Too Far

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Breakfast-cereal boxes are a window into both the politics of food and American culture. As a particularly timely example, since Robert F. Kennedy Jr. took office last year as secretary of health and human services, he has called for the removal of artificial dyes from breakfast cereals. On Fox News in 2024, he lamented that the bright colors in Froot Loops are “literally poisoning our kids.” (How exactly these dyes interact with human health is [complicated](#).)

Cereal companies responded right away. General Mills announced last month that it had transitioned its entire U.S. portfolio of cereals—including Trix and Lucky Charms—to all-natural dyes made from fruits, veggies, and spices. Kellogg had previously announced plans to do the same by the end of 2027. Target stopped selling any cereals with artificial colors earlier this year.

For the Make America Healthy Again movement, the removal of artificial dyes is a big win. But cereal still comes with a major concern for many consumers. Nearly all ready-to-eat breakfast cereals sold in the United States—and especially those marketed to children—are presweetened.

The initial loading of breakfast cereals with sugar has been attributed to a single person: Jim Rex, a heating-equipment salesman who lived in Pennsylvania in the early 20th century. As the story goes, Rex was appalled by the spoonfuls of sugar his kids added to their breakfast cereals and set out to create a version that would not induce such behavior. His brilliant contribution: a glossy honey coating on puffed wheat, a cereal he named Ranger Joe Wheat Honnies in 1939.

It didn’t take long for Rex’s strategy to backfire. By 1949, Post had launched Sugar Crisp. Kellogg introduced Sugar Pops in 1951, Sugar Frosted Flakes in 1952, and Froot Loops in 1963, each among the company’s all-time best sellers. General Mills launched Sugar Smiles in 1953. The next year, the company added sugar and artificial colors to its Kix cereal, thus creating Trix.

In 1950, such presweetened cereals represented just 5 percent of all cereals sold, but by the mid-1970s, kids accounted for almost 40 percent of all cereal consumption. In 2014, the Environmental Working Group estimated that kids could ingest about nine pounds of sugar a year just by eating a serving of cereal every day.

Advocates for children’s health have long complained about the high sugar content of breakfast cereals. In the early 1970s, Congress held hearings to highlight cereal’s inadequate nutritional quality. Cereal companies objected, arguing, correctly, that grains are nutritious. But they also responded by trying to make their products *appear* less sugary.

They began by removing the S-word from cereal names, and some substituted honey for sugar on the theory that people perceive honey as more wholesome and nutritious. In the 1990s, companies hit on another clever strategy: If they used multiple sugar types, they could list grains first on a product’s ingredients but sprinkle sugars throughout the list. Cereals looked healthier, but when Consumer Reports compared the sugars in 27 breakfast cereals in 2008, it found that many were still 50 percent sugar by weight. Rumors circulated that federal agencies were working to set nutrition standards for foods advertised on television programs aimed at children younger than 12, which would likely spell trouble for sugary cereals.

In 2009, General Mills pledged to reduce sugar in its most popular kids’ cereals—most of which had at least 12 grams a serving—to single digits. Its pledge would apply to 10 cereals, including some of its most popular, such as Lucky Charms and Cocoa Puffs. The results were mixed. By 2012, General Mills had

reached the single-digit goal for Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Cookie Crisp, and more. Some of this success was due to decreased serving size. And the best General Mills could do for Lucky Charms was 10 grams of sugar in a three-quarters-cup serving—which the company found to be the minimum sweet spot for kids’ acceptance. The project had encountered a harsh reality: Kids like sugar, and companies remove it at their peril.

Sugary cereal is not just a consumer concern; it is also a matter of government nutrition policy. Since 1980, the federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has limited the sugars in cereals it will cover to six grams an ounce, about half of the amount in typical cereals aimed at kids. WIC can be a lucrative business for cereals that qualify, so the limit has induced companies to take two actions. The first is to formulate new cereals with less sugar specifically for the WIC market. In 2006, for example, General Mills introduced a new kid-targeted cereal, Dora the Explorer, “lightly sweetened cinnamon corn puffs,” with six grams of sugar in a 27-gram serving—an amount that meets the WIC standards.

The second is to petition to change how sugar in cereals is counted. When the six-gram rule went into effect, in the early 1980s, Kellogg immediately objected. Its Bran Flakes met the WIC standards, but Raisin Bran did not; it contained 12 grams of sugar an ounce, seven from the raisins. Kellogg argued that raisins are healthy and pointed out that WIC was encouraging women to add raisins to their diet to increase their iron intake. For decades, despite Kellogg’s persistent efforts, the U.S. Department of Agriculture did not budge. But times change. In 2024, USDA issued its third comprehensive update to the WIC food package since 1975. The agency retained the six-gram limit but specified that it applied only to added, not total, sugars. It said the policy change was justified to align with listing “added sugars” on food labels and with the government publication *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, and to create a “more permissive standard for products containing naturally occurring sugars.”

The distinction between natural and added sugars has continued under Kennedy. The [new dietary guidelines](#), released in January, declare that no amount of added sugar is recommended for healthy eating. At a press conference announcing the new guidelines, Kennedy told reporters, “Today, our government declares war on added sugar.”

Current breakfast cereals have less sugar than they did years ago, but it’s hard to remove completely. Some amount of sugar is still needed to mask the bitter taste of added vitamins. Sugar also helps cereal flakes, puffs, and Os hold their shape in milk. Less sugar is better for kids’ health, but more is better for structural integrity—and taste.

For a truly healthy cereal, look to a time before Jim Rex. The most nutritious option will have one ingredient: wheat or oats. Even if you add your own teaspoon of sugar, it will be only four grams.

This article has been adapted from Marion Nestle and Lisa Sutherland’s new book, [Sugar Coated](#).



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