Does it attack the body’s vital functions in ways that other calorie-laden foods don’t?

A small, vocal and increasingly influential vanguard of scientists led by California pediatric endocrinologist Robert Lustig contends that sugar isn’t just “empty calories.” They say it’s actually poisonous – that it changes the body’s metabolism, raises blood pressure, inflicts liver damage and sets the stage for diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer. Some scientists contend that sugar is addictive, like cocaine. These provocative theories require more extensive research.

There’s no debate that the American diet is spiked with added sugar in a surprising array of processed foods like cereals, sports drinks, soft drinks and even fruit drinks. (Any beverage that’s not 100 percent fruit juice probably contains added sugar.)

The average American child consumes half a cup of added sugar a day, not counting the natural sugars in fruit and milk. These added sugars squeeze out vital nutrition. Fewer than 5 percent of Americans and less than 1 percent of teens eat the servings of fruits and vegetables recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Environmental Working Group and other public health organizations are calling on the federal Food and Drug Administration to require that food labels disclose added sugar. At present, labels show only total sugars.

In the meantime, the best way to spot insidious added sugars is to watch out for ingredients with sugar, syrup, nectar or juice in their names, honey, molasses or any substance that end in “–ose” (dextrose, fructose, maltose). And make that smoothie at home so you know what’s in it.