



ELITE

Personal Training and Fitness Solutions

# HEALTH TOPIC OF THE WEEK

## 8/8: Sugar Alternatives

Most people understand, in some measure, that excessive sugar consumption is dangerously unhealthy. Last week we learned why.

So, what do we do to cut down or replace sugar? Many people turn to sugar substitutes. Sugar substitutes are categorized as natural or synthetic. As bad as natural sugar can be, artificial sugar is WAY worse! Let's look at sweeteners - the good, the bad and the ugly.

### THE GOOD (Natural)

The following are natural sweeteners. Neither raises blood sugar levels, making them good options for people with diabetes.

#### Stevia

Stevia is an herb native to South America. It is 100-200 times sweeter than sugar, so it can be used in very small doses to sweeten recipes. Stevia comes in powder, liquid, and tablet form. Many people report a bitter aftertaste. Beware of "Stevia blend" on the label. Blends may involve bleaching or added chemicals. Look for 100% organic Stevia.



#### Monk Fruit

Monk fruit is a small orange fruit native to Southern China. It is full of antioxidants. Monk fruit has anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial benefits. Monk fruit extract is my personal favorite sugar substitute. There is no bitter aftertaste. Monk fruit extract comes from fermented monk fruit pulp. Although the sugars are removed, the sweetness profile is not affected. Monk fruit extract is 200 times sweeter than sugar.



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## THE BAD (BUT STILL NATURAL)

Just because something is natural doesn't mean it's healthy. Arsenic and strychnine are natural too, but it's not a good idea to ingest them! Natural sweeteners are marketed as healthier options; however, they often undergo significant processing and refining. And while some do contain a few vitamins and minerals, most have the same amount of sugar as white sugar.

Natural-but-potentially bad sweeteners are divided into two groups: calorie and low calorie.

### Caloric Natural Sweeteners

- **Honey** has flavonoids and antioxidants. Because it may have bacterial spores, it should not be fed to children under age one.
- **Molasses** contains manganese, iron, magnesium, potassium, and calcium. Molasses comes in light & dark versions. Dark molasses tastes less sweet and more bitter.
- **Maple syrup** is low in vitamin content. However, there are quite a few minerals present. One tablespoon of maple syrup contains approximately 33% of your daily value of manganese, which is essential for healthy bones.
- **Coconut sugar** is almost identical to regular cane sugar in terms of nutrients and calories.
- **Agave nectar** has a high fructose content that may reduce insulin sensitivity and worsen liver health. Agave is also a higher-calorie sweetener than table sugar.



### Low-Calorie Natural Sweeteners

- **Swerve** is a combination of erythritol, obtained through corn fermentation and oligosaccharides, a type of prebiotic fiber. Swerve does have natural flavors, but these are due to chemical additions too numerous to list. Swerve comes in granular and confection form and has a 1:1 ratio to sugar, making it easy to use. It has five calories per teaspoon.
- **Erythritol** is a sugar alcohol that can cause nausea, bloating, diarrhea, and abdominal cramps. It has the same calories as sugar and a glycemic index of zero. It is well researched and generally considered safe. However, it is produced from GMO corn. If you're going to use this sweetener, go organic.



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## THE UGLY



### Synthetic (artificial) sweeteners

Synthetically produced non-calorie sweeteners are 100 – 1000 times sweeter than sugar. They are widely used in soft drinks, desserts, baked goods, candies, canned goods, dairy products, protein bars and powdered drink mixes.

- **High fructose corn syrup** [often shortened to corn syrup] is prevalent in packaged and processed foods. It makes up 55% of the sugar consumed in the U.S. Besides being extremely unhealthy, corn syrup destroys healthy gut bacteria and stimulates the hormone ghrelin, which increases appetite. This explains why you can gorge on junk food without feeling full, but you can't gorge on carrots.
- **Aspartame** is sold as Equal, NutraSweet and Sugar Twin. It is 200 times sweeter than sugar and is present in over 6000 products and 500 medications. Its safety profile is quite controversial. Reported side effects include dizziness, headaches, and mood disorders. Health risks include increased risk of cancer and fetal development damage in a rare genetic disorder called phenylketonuria.
- **Acesulfame potassium (ACE-K)** is sold as Sweet One and Sunnet. This artificial sweetener is 200 times sweeter than sugar. ACE-K has a bitter aftertaste. It is often blended with other synthetic sweeteners. ACE-K received FDA approval in 1988 following some poor-quality research in the 70s. The controversy remains. The Center for Science and the Public Interest maintains that current research does not prove ACE-K's safety.



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- **Sucralose** is sold as Splenda. It is only 5% sucralose and 95% maltodextrin [corn syrup]. It is 600 times sweeter than sugar. Sucralose was originally developed as an insecticide. It was never meant for human consumption! Yet the FDA approved sucralose in 1998 for use in 15 food and beverage categories, and later in 1999 they approved sucralose as a general-purpose sweetener for all food and beverages. Under higher temperatures sucralose breaks down to produce toxic compounds. Sucralose increases risks for insulin resistance, diabetes, irritable bowel, Crohn's disease, and thyroid dysfunction. If that's not bad enough, sucralose can potentially damage DNA.
- **Saccharin** was first developed in 1878 as a derivative of coal tar. It is sold as Sweet' N Low, Sweet Twin and Necta Sweet. In 1977 a warning label was placed on packaging advising consumers that saccharin was linked to bladder cancer in rats. The warning label was removed in 2000! Reported side effects include headache, dermatological issues, and diarrhea.



## Takeaways

Excessive sugar consumption is very bad for your health. Replacing sugar with artificial sweeteners is even worse. Limit your added sugar intake to 6-8 teaspoons a day.

Some folks try to beat their sugar habit by going cold turkey and eliminating all sweets. This includes all fruit, dairy, and refined grains. Diet changes like this are too drastic to keep up with. Changes that you can do only for the short term mean you'll fall back to old habits.

Nutrition consultations are available at Elite Personal Training and Fitness Solutions. We can help you develop healthy eating habits that are both sensible and sustainable.



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