



To Sweeten or Not To Sweeten?

We all have a natural tendency to enjoy things that taste sweet. While there is general agreement that most of us tend to overdo it with sugar, there is debate about whether or not sugar substitutes are a better choice.



Nutritive vs. Non-Nutritive Sweeteners

Sweeteners may have many names, but they all fall into two basic categories - those with and those without calories. Nutritive sweeteners include sugars, honey, syrups, molasses and nectars that all contain about the same amount of calories. Sugar alcohols are also used to add sweetness to foods and vary in their caloric levels. Non-nutritive sweeteners (NNS), on the other hand offer sweetness without the calories. NNS currently allowed by the FDA include Saccharin, Aspartame (contains a small amount of calories), Acesulfame potassium (Ace-K), Sucralose, Neotame, Advantame, Steviol glycosides and Luo Han Guo fruit extracts. They are found in a variety of foods and drinks under both generic and brand names.



Are sweeteners safe?

All sweeteners currently approved for use by the FDA are considered to be safe and have either undergone extensive testing or are generally recognized as safe. As with all foods and ingredients, it is important to balance the amount we take in with our overall diet. Recent studies have looked at possible connections between sweeteners and weight management with varying results. Because nutritive sweeteners add calories to the foods and beverages they are present in, getting too many of them can make weight management more difficult. While a couple of small studies have questioned the benefits of non-nutritive sweeteners, most research suggests that they are a safe alternative to those looking to satisfy a sweet tooth without the extra calories.



How to choose safely:

We tend to associate sweetness with indulgent foods, but there are many healthful foods that are naturally sweet like fruit, milk and some vegetables. While they contain calories, they are also full of beneficial nutrients. Focusing on naturally sweet foods and reducing the amount of added sweeteners we take in can be a positive step for overall health. When choosing between sweeteners, consider how they each fit into your overall diet and wellness goals.



REFERENCES:

1. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Use of Nutritive and Nonnutritive Sweeteners. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2012;112:739-758.
2. Additional Information about High-Intensity Sweeteners Permitted for use in Food in the United States. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Available at www.fda.gov.

Written by Jennifer M. Ignacio, MS, RD.