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Best and Worst Sweeteners for Weight Loss



With so many people making a renewed effort to eat better in the new year, talk of calories — and more specifically, how to save them — is at its annual peak. At Everyday Health, we're getting lots of questions from readers about sugar and which type is best for people looking to lose weight and give their diet a healthy makeover. Unfortunately, I think these questions about types of sugar obscure the far more important question: Are you eating too much sugar?

The American Heart Association recommends that women consume no more than 6 teaspoons (24 grams) of added sugar per day, while men should have no more than 9 teaspoons (36 grams). If you're going overboard on sugar, you're putting your health at risk, whether that sugar is coming in the form of maple syrup, agave, or high fructose corn syrup. For these individuals, the priority should always be to eat less sugar by cutting down on sweetened foods and beverages.

As for the best type, it's difficult to give definitive answers because there haven't been enough high-quality, long-term studies comparing the metabolic effects of different types of sugar in people, and the studies that have been done in animals and humans have been contradictory. Many of the reasons people use to promote or denigrate specific sugars and sugar substitutes are based on scientific theories that aren't well-validated. With all of that said, here's a brief primer on the most popular sweeteners and some health implications to consider when satisfying your sweet tooth.

THE 'REAL' STUFF: CANE SUGAR (TABLE SUGAR), MAPLE SYRUP, HONEY

I am of the increasingly popular belief that small amounts of real sugars (in fruit, for example) are the ideal way to enjoy sweet foods. Adding a few teaspoons of any of these sugars to your oatmeal, coffee, or smoothie (not ALL of these foods on the same day!), or eating one to two foods with added sugar (such as cereal, ice cream, cookies, or candy) per day is a perfectly reasonable approach. People with diabetes can also enjoy small portions of treats as part of an overall healthy diet, provided they account for the carbohydrates in their food plan. But restraint is key for everyone: all of these sugars add empty calories to the tune of 50 to 60 calories per tablespoon. Since table sugar, maple syrup, and honey are true sugars, they raise blood sugar quickly (just like white flour and other refined carbohydrates) and it's easier to maintain a healthy weight.

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I am of the increasingly popular belief that small amounts of real sugar from natural sources is the ideal way to enjoy sweet foods. Adding a few teaspoons of any of these sugars to yogurt, oatmeal, coffee, or tea (but not ALL of these foods on the same day!), or eating one to two foods with added sugar (such as cereal, ice cream, cookies, or candy) per day is a perfectly reasonable approach. People with diabetes can also enjoy small portions of treats with real sugar as part of an overall healthy diet, provided they account for the carbohydrates in their food plan. But restraint is key for everyone, since of all of these sugars add empty calories to the tune of 50 to 60 calories per tablespoon. Since table sugar, maple syrup, and honey are all true sugars, they raise blood sugar quickly (just like white flour and other refined carbohydrates), and if eaten in excess they can make it difficult to maintain a healthy weight.

AGAVE

Agave deserves special mention because it's higher in fructose than other natural sweeteners — in fact, it can be as high as 90 percent fructose. On the plus side, fructose doesn't raise blood sugars as much as glucose, which means agave has a

lower glycemic index than other caloric sweeteners. However, that benefit comes at a cost. Fructose isn't regulated by insulin the same way that glucose is, and there's some evidence that large amounts of fructose raise levels of blood fats called triglycerides, which may contribute to other health problems like heart disease, fatty liver, and metabolic syndrome. While a few teaspoons of agave is fine (and you shouldn't be using more than that any way), it's certainly not a sweetener to seek out for its health benefits.

HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN SYRUP

High fructose corn syrup isn't actually much higher in fructose than regular table sugar (sucrose), and most (but not all) research shows that the body processes them similarly, suggesting high fructose corn syrup is no worse than other added sugars. That said, high fructose corn syrup is usually found in hyper-processed foods that aren't good choices for many other reasons. Treat it like other added sugars, and stick to the daily limits outlined above.

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS: ASPARTAME, SUCRALOSE, SACCHARIN, ACESULFAME POTASSIUM

Artificial sweeteners don't provide calories and carbohydrates, so they don't raise blood sugars after meals the same way that real sugars do. People have been relying on sugar-free foods and diet drinks to help them lose weight for decades, but a 2012 American Heart Association report found there is not enough evidence to conclusively confirm that substituting artificial sweeteners for sugar is an effective weight loss strategy. Recent research has raised intriguing questions about whether artificial sweeteners have undesirable metabolic effects, but these theories haven't yet been validated. I feel that the best approach to limiting sugar is to reduce the total amount of sugar you eat, rather than replacing sugary beverages and foods with artificially-sweetened versions. That said, for people who absolutely won't give up drinking sweet-flavored beverages, diet drinks are a better choice than sugar-loaded sodas.

STEVIA

Derived from the stevia plant, stevia is touted as an all-natural, calorie-free alternative to artificial sweeteners. However, the form used in packaged foods, beverages, and packets is actually a highly processed and refined ingredient, not a straight plant extract. The whole-leaf and crude extract forms of stevia still haven't been approved by the FDA as food additives because of unresolved safety concerns. I prefer small amounts of real sugars to stevia, but ultimately it's a personal preference.

SUGAR ALCOHOLS

Sugar alcohols are typically found in sugar-free gums and candies. They provide fewer calories and carbohydrates than regular sugar and have less impact on blood sugar because they are poorly digested. While sugar alcohols can be a good option for diabetics, they can cause cramping, diarrhea, and general gastrointestinal distress if consumed in large amounts.

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