

The Sweet Life

By Margie Markarian

Can sugar substitutes help kids live a healthier lifestyle?

Do you chew sugarless gum? Drink diet soft drinks? Sweeten your morning cereal with a sugar substitute from one of those little blue, yellow, or pink packets? You're not alone.

Many kids use low-calorie sweeteners and sugar-free foods to help prevent cavities or help control their weight. Other kids use those products because they think they are healthier than real sugar is. They taste good and seem like a great choice. But how do the alternatives measure up?

Safe Substitutes

With more people using low-calorie sweeteners, some worry about whether they are healthy. Rumors have linked some sweeteners to cancer, weight gain, and toxic substances. But research shows that the most common sugar substitutes are safe. Those alternatives to sugar include:

- **Sucralose,**
- **Aspartame,**
- **Saccharin,** and
- **Acesulfame potassium (also known as acesulfame-K).**

Today, those substances sweeten most sugar free foods and beverages. There is another popular sweetener that is made from the plant known as stevia. But it wasn't approved for use in food the way the others were, so there may be some questions about its use as a sweetener.

A Healthy Boost for Some

Many experts believe low-calorie sweeteners can play a role in helping some kids live healthy lifestyles. But they're not the whole answer. "It's always going to be better to balance out your diet and not eat or drink too many sugary foods," says Ruth Kava, former director of nutrition for the American Council on Science and Health.

Most of the time, she says, a treat flavored with an artificial sweetener is a better choice than a sugary one. That goes double for kids with diabetes, who have to watch their sugar intake. Low-calorie sweeteners help diabetics

safely enjoy a variety of foods while managing their illness. “Teens with type 1 diabetes have to monitor what they eat and carefully balance it with their insulin injections,” says Kava. Artificially sweetened products give them the chance, she says, “to fit in and have a soda with everyone else.”

People who are trying to lose weight to get healthier will often turn to low-calorie sweeteners to ease the change to a healthier diet. As a result, diet sodas and sugar-free yogurts are often the first choice for people looking to cut calories while keeping their taste buds happy.

Low-calorie sweeteners can also help keep teeth healthy. That’s because sugar contributes to tooth decay that can cause cavities. Low-calorie sweeteners don’t. In fact, the American Dental Association recently gave its seal of acceptance to three sugar-free gums. So, if you chew gum regularly, it makes sense for you to switch to a sugarless variety.

Too Much Sweetness?

Others say sugar substitutes should be avoided. It’s best to enjoy foods’ true flavors, they say, instead of artificial ones. There is research to back that up. Studies have found that sweet flavors—even when there’s no actual sugar in sight—can cause people to eat more and crave more sweet things. That probably explains why studies have linked people’s use of low-calorie sweeteners to weight gain, not weight loss.

It’s Up to You

Having options is a good thing. “Everything in moderation,” says Marilyn Tanner-Blasiar. She’s a pediatric dietitian and former spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Enjoying a diet soft drink once in a while is OK. More than that and you’re probably not drinking as much water or calcium- and vitamin-rich milk as you should be. Satisfy your sweet tooth with artificially sweetened products and you might be skipping other sweet and nutritious foods, such as fruit.

Want to surprise your grandpa with a treat, but you know he can’t eat sugar because of his diabetes? It’s great to know that you can mix up a batch of cookies using an artificial sweetener.

Looking to make the healthiest choices when it comes to what you eat and drink? Low-calorie sweeteners may help. But in many cases, your best bet won’t be a sugary one at all. Grab a piece of fruit for some natural sweetness (as well as vitamins, minerals, and fiber). Or add a few lemon or orange slices to a glass of water for a light but refreshing beverage. Now

that's sweet!

How Sweet Is It?

A little goes a long way when it comes to low calorie sweeteners. You need only a small amount to sweeten your cereal, coffee, or iced tea. Here's how many times sweeter the most widely used sugar substitutes are when compared with what's in your sugar bowl.

| SUGAR SUBSTITUTE | BRAND NAME | TIMES SWEETER THAN SUGAR |
|------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Aspartame | NutraSweet, Equal | 200 |
| Acesulfame-K | Sweet One, Sunett | 200 |
| Saccharin | Sweet'N Low, SugarTwin | 300 |
| Sucralose | Splenda | 600 |

Which Is Where?

A look at some sweeteners in popular sugar-free foods and drinks

| Food/Drink | Artificial Sweetener |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Diet soft drinks (most kinds) | aspartame |
| Flavored waters | sucralose |
| Light powdered drink mix | aspartame and acesulfame-K |
| Sugar-free gelatin | aspartame and acesulfame-K |
| Light yogurt | aspartame |
| No sugar added ice cream | sucralose, maltitol, sorbitol, acesulfame-K, lactitol |