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How sweet it isn't: The scoop on sweeteners

Natural sweeteners like sugar, honey and maple syrup are extracts of real foods, and are commonly referred to as refined carbohydrates. All sugars contain 4 calories per gram, or 18 calories per spoonful. Natural sugars are quickly absorbed and assimilated, and if consumed in excess, overwork the pancreas and adrenal glands, as well as contribute to dental cavities.

In view of all the bad press sugar has received, many people have turned to artificial sweeteners to provide that sweet taste without the calorie kicker. Is this really a healthful step? Decide for yourself:

There are four main non-nutritional or chemical sweeteners that have been introduced into our food supply.

Cyclamate was banned in the US in 1969, because it was clearly carcinogenic (cancer-causing) in lab studies. A modified version is still available in Canada as **Sweet 'N Low**. The package disclaimer states to only use cyclamates, under the advice of a physician, (and if your physician has read all the current studies, he or she would never recommend it for you!)

Saccharin has been around since the early 1900's, but was not widely used until Cyclamate was banned. Canada banned Saccharin in 1977, when it was discovered to increase the risk of bladder cancer in men and to have potential toxicity in pregnancy.

Aspartame (NutraSweet, Equal) has the longest list of complaints the FDA has ever received against an approved food additive. Symptoms associated with Aspartame range from rashes, visual disturbance, migraine, and depression to increased seizures in epileptics and a possible association with brain tumors! As well, the body's metabolism of Aspartame leads to the production of methanol, a known toxin, in the intestinal tract. Many doctors advise pregnant women to avoid aspartame. Do you need any more reasons to banish Aspartame from your healthy diet?

Sucralose (Splenda) was declared safe in 1990. However, researchers report decreased immunity and enlarged livers and kidneys in lab rats fed on Sucralose. Just like Cyclamate and Saccharin, we may find compelling evidence to withdraw it from the market in the future.

Most folks use artificial sweeteners to control their blood sugar or help shed excess pounds. However, not one study has ever demonstrated these effects. In fact, there is some evidence that artificial sweeteners stimulate the appetite and interfere with blood sugar regulation. During the last few decades, after widespread use of these products, North Americans have become heavier than ever and the rate of adult-onset diabetes has soared.

What can an informed consumer do? Your best bet is to reduce your sweet habit overall. Start by cutting out diet soft drinks, which have nothing to offer you nutritionally in any case. Learn to appreciate the naturally sweet flavors of whole natural foods. And if you do yearn for something sweet, turn to honey, maple syrup or a pinch of raw sugar instead. Or why not try Agave and Stevia? These are natural sweeteners from plant sources that are safe and not disruptive to blood sugar levels.