



Wellness



SWEET SEDUCTION

They help you cut down your sugar intake, but over-using artificial sweeteners can lead to trouble

by Veenu Singh

WHATEVER DIET you follow, there is one golden rule to losing or maintaining weight - avoid sugar. Sugar is the single biggest culprit in weight gain and other related problems. But eliminating it from your diet requires a conscious decision and strong willpower. Which is why sugar-free or artificially sweetened foods have become so popular.

But what exactly are artificial sweeteners? And can everyone use them?

THE LOWDOWN

"Artificial sweeteners are chemicals or natural compounds that offer the sweetness of sugar without as many calories," says Jyoti Arora, chief dietician, Artemis Health Institute. "Because the substitutes are sweeter than sugar, it takes a smaller quantity to create the same sweetness."

Ideally, only people suffering from diabetes should use artificial sweeteners, says Arora. Nutritionist Shikha Sharma adds: "It is better to restrict the intake of these substitutes to the minimum to maintain good health, because most of them are made of saccharin or aspartame which may harm your body in the long run."

WHAT'S WHAT

Here's a look at the various artificial sweeteners available on the market.

Sweet 'n' Low: This is a mix of dextrose and saccharin. Dextrose is a natural carbohydrate used to dilute the actual sweetener which is saccharin. Saccharin is 300-500 times sweeter than sugar and has no calories because it is not digested by the body. "Saccharin is one of the cheapest and most easily available forms of artificial sweetener," says Nidhi Sahai, senior dietician at Max Healthcare. "It is widely used in a variety of 'sugar-free' products. People with diabetes, as well as those looking for weight



loss can use it, but only in moderation."

Equal: This artificial sweetener contains aspartame, a fully artificial product. Its base components (aspartic acid and phenylalanine) are actually protein molecules. Aspartame is about 200 times sweeter than natural sugar, and has 'virtually' no calories. "Although sweeteners with aspartame are widely used, some reports suggest that it may be harmful in the long run," says Arora. "So use it in moderation."

Splenda, Sugar Free Natura, Zero: These are brand names for sucralose sweeteners. Sucralose is made from natural sugar by a process of chlorination. The addition of chlorine to the sugar molecule makes it unusable by the body, and it is not broken down by your metabolism. "Sucralose is 600 times sweeter than natural sugar, contains no calories and is a healthier form of artificial sweetener," says Sharma. "It is used in beverages, frozen desserts, chewing gum and other products."

Stevia: Stevia is considered the safest of all sweeteners. It is derived from the leaves of the stevia plant and provides 250 to 300 times the sweetness of sugar. "Since it is derived from a plant, it is safer than the others," says Sharma. "But it is relatively new in the market so wait and watch."

SHAKEN AND STIRRED

"Pregnant or lactating mothers and children suffering from juvenile diabetes must not use any kind of artificial sweetener," says Arora. If you don't fall in these categories, you can use them, but no more than three or four sachets a day.

"If you have diabetes, remember, some foods containing artificial sweeteners, such as sugar-free yoghurt, can still affect your blood sugar level due to other carbohydrates or proteins in the food," says Sharma.

Also, foods containing sugar substitutes may contain calories. Just removing sugar from sweet treats doesn't make them low-calorie. The fats and carbohydrates they continue to contain still provide more calories that you may require.

And lastly, unlike fruits, vegetables and whole grains, sugar-free soft drinks, candy and desserts often provide few - if any - beneficial nutrients.

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NATURE'S CURE

HONEY: Contains minerals. Use in very small amounts, ideally drizzled on top of hot food or mixed with lemon as a dressing. Do not cook honey or use while baking as it becomes toxic.

FIGS: Natural laxative, source of iron. Can be used in cooking. Pre-soak for better taste.

DATES: Can also be used in cooking.

JAGGERY: Excellent source of iron.

RAISINS: When added as a sweetening agent, it gives both health and taste.

DRIED PRUNES, APPLES ETC: Excellent for adding to desserts and salads.