

SWEETENERS

WHAT ARE THEY?

Why do we crave sweets? Are there times when you absolutely crave chocolates, candies, or cakes? The average American consumes well over 20 teaspoons of added sugar on a daily basis, which adds up to an average of 142 pounds of sugar per person, per year! That's more than two times what the USDA recommends.

Below you will find information on natural sweeteners, all of which are less processed than refined white sugar, and create fewer fluctuations in blood sugar levels. Although these sweeteners are generally safer alternatives to white sugar, they should only be used in moderation.

Agave Nectar

Agave nectar, or agave syrup, is a natural liquid sweetener made from the juice of the agave cactus. It is made from the soaking, sprouting, mashing, cooking and roasting of agave. Many consumers prefer this natural sweetener because it moves through the digestive system slower than other refined sugars. It contains approximately 65% fructose, 30% complex carbohydrate, 3% protein. Some research suggests that fructose affects the hormone leptin, which affects appetite and satiety. Too much fructose may result in overeating. The USDA recommends agave.

Barley Malt

Barley malt syrup is a thick, sticky, brown sweetener and is about half as sweet as refined white sugar. It is made from the soaking, sprouting, mashing, cooking and roasting of barley. Many consumers prefer this natural sweetener because it moves through the digestive system slower than other refined sugars. It contains approximately 65% maltose, 30% complex carbohydrate, 3% protein.

Xylitol - recommended for diabetics

Also referred to as birch sugar, this natural sugar substitute is derived from birch tree fiber, and occurs naturally in many fruits and vegetables. There have been many reported benefits of xylitol. Research suggests that this natural sweetener prevents tooth decay, improves bone density, increases white blood cell activity, and prevents streptococcus infections. Xylitol is also deemed as safe for diabetics because it does not raise blood sugar levels. However, consumption of xylitol may result in bloating, diarrhea, and gas so be aware of these effects. The USDA recommends xylitol.

Brown Rice Syrup

This product consists of brown rice that has been ground and cooked, converting the starches to maltose. Brown rice syrup tastes like moderately sweet butter scotch and is quite delicious. It has 1% glucose and 3% glucose. The small amount of glucose is absorbed into the bloodstream immediately, but the complex carbohydrates and maltose are more slowly absorbed, providing a steadier supply of energy.

Coconut Sugar - recommended

Coconut sugar is produced from the sap of the coconut palm flowers. The nectar is collected and heated until it is dried and caramelized. Then it is turned into a powder that looks a lot like brown sugar. Coconut sugar is a great low-glycemic sweetener. It contains vitamins, minerals and fiber. It can replace regular sugar in recipes one-to-one.

Honey - recommended

One of the oldest natural sweeteners, honey can have a range of flavors, from dark and strong to light and mild. Raw honey contains small amounts of enzymes, minerals and vitamins. Consuming local honey can help build up your immunity to allergens in your area – by introducing your body to the bee pollen.

Maple Syrup - recommended

Maple syrup is made from boiled-down maple tree sap. It adds a pleasant flavor to foods and is great for baking. Be sure to buy 100% pure maple syrup and not maple-flavored corn syrup. Grade B is stronger in flavor and said to have more minerals than Grade A.

Molasses

Organic molasses is probably the most nutritious sweetener derived from sugar cane or sugar beet, and is made by a process of clarifying and blending the extracted juices. The longer the juice is boiled, the less sweet, more nutritious and darker the product is. Blackstrap molasses is the darkest and most nutritious. It is often used in baking and as a natural sweetener. It is also used in the production of vinegar and as a natural preservative.

Stevia - recommended for those with insulin resistance and/or PCOS

This leafy herb also known as honey leaf has been used for centuries by native South Americans. The extract from stevia is approximately 100 to 300 times sweeter than white sugar. It can be used in cooking, baking and as a sugar substitute in most beverages. Stevia has been shown to have a positive effect on blood sugar levels by increasing insulin production, and decreasing insulin resistance. Stevia is available in a powder or liquid form, but be sure to get the green or brown liquids or powders, as the white and clear versions are highly refined.

USING NATURAL SWEETENERS

Natural sweeteners can be used to replace sugar in any recipe. Here is a guide to substituting these products for sugar. The amount indicated is equivalent to 1 cup of sugar, and the third column details what it is best to use for.

| Sweetener | Amount = 1 cup Sugar | Use |
|---------------------|---|--------------------------|
| honey | 1/2-2/3 cup | all-purpose |
| maple syrup | 1/2-3/4 cup | baking, desserts, sauces |
| maple sugar | 1/2-1/3 cup | baking, candies |
| barley malt syrup | 1-1 1/4 cups | bread and baking |
| brown rice syrup | 1-1 1/3 cups | baking, cakes, sauces |
| date sugar | 2/3 cup | bread, baking, candies |
| coconut sugar | 1 cup | all-purpose |
| blackstrap molasses | 1 to 1 1/3 cups | all-purpose |
| stevia | see manufacturer's label for quantity and usage, as they vary | |

Selection

These sweeteners can be found in natural food stores. Having a couple of different natural sweeteners in your kitchen will ensure that you have one for every need. Coconut sugar is wonderful in tea because it tastes great and dissolves easily. Brown rice syrup works well in your favorite cookie recipe. Use organic sweeteners when possible. Be a food detective and check labels of processed food to see what type of sweetener is being used. There are many cereals, snack foods, soymilks and sauces that use these natural sweeteners in place of sugar.

Benefits

Each sweetener has its benefits. Honey, maple syrup/sugar and date sugar contain some nutrients. Barley malt, brown rice syrup and coconut sugar are slower to enter the bloodstream and are more suitable for those with blood sugar issues. Stevia does not affect the bloodstream, and can be up to 300 times sweeter than sugar depending on the form (liquid or powder).