

# How Do You Sweeten Your Life?

**T**ruvia, Splenda, Agave, Equal, or just plain sugar? It used to be that if you wanted to sweeten your foods or drinks, you'd sprinkle on a bit of sugar. Then came the time when thin was in and zero-calorie sugar substitutes hit the market. Sweetening choices remained fairly steady until recently because there's been an influx of artificial, natural, low-calorie, zero-calorie, low-glycemic index, and other sweeteners filling your grocers' shelves. Choosing a sweetener can be overwhelming when you're faced with all of these options. Make the choice easier with this guide.

There are two main types of sweeteners. Nutritive sweeteners, or those containing calories, include white and brown sugar, molasses, honey, and agave. Nonnutritive sweeteners, such as sucralose (Splenda), stevia (Truvia), saccharin (Sweet'N Low), and aspartame (Equal, NutraSweet), are calorie free. This group of sweeteners can be divided into artificial (those created by scientists in a lab), and natural (those created from sources found in nature, such as fruits and plants). All these sweeteners have been

tested to some degree and at this point, all but one has been deemed safe. (Saccharin has been linked to cancer in lab animals.) That being said, the choice of natural vs. artificial is usually a personal choice.

Nutritionally speaking, however, the decision is a bit more complicated. Both nutritive and nonnutritive sweeteners have pros and cons. To help you make the choice that's best for you and your family, we've gathered information from both research studies and manufacturers about the benefits and drawbacks.

The facts about nutritive sweeteners are pretty cut-and-dried: A high intake of foods and drinks that contain them can lead to dental caries, replace other more nutrient-dense foods in the diet, and lead to weight gain.

With nonnutritive sweeteners, the picture isn't so clear. At first glance, it appears that getting the sweet taste you like with no calories or impact on blood sugar levels would be a win-win proposition. However, even though these sugar substitutes have been labeled as safe, the research results have

been mixed. Some studies demonstrate no risk to health while others indicate that the sugar substitutes increase the risk of certain diseases, including various cancers. In addition, these sweeteners haven't been around very long and far more research needs to be done to demonstrate they cause no harm when consumed over long periods of time.

What adds to the confusion is the question of whether calorie-free sweeteners really do lead to an overall lower calorie intake, which would be beneficial in preventing weight gain and promoting weight loss. A good deal of research has been done on this topic, specifically focusing on beverages. Again, the research has produced mixed results.



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It's been shown that food calories replace each other, but beverage calories don't. In other words, beverages may make us feel full, but we don't eat less food throughout the day because we drink more liquid calories. So, no matter many calories we drink, we end up eating the same amount of food throughout the day. When you look at it that way, you may be inclined to replace your sugar-sweetened, calorie-rich drinks with sugar-free, calorie-free drinks to easily cut calories.

However, research has also shown that if you replace sugar-sweetened drinks with so-called diet drinks containing no calories, you will lose weight but only about one-half as much as if you'd switched to water instead. Some of the thinking behind this research is that your body tastes the sweet, but because liquid calories don't satisfy like those that are solid, we continue to desire more sweet foods to feel satisfied.

Another angle to consider when choosing a sweetener is whether it will do what you need it to do. Of course sugar sweetens, as do all the other sweeteners, but it does much more as an ingredient in baking. It promotes browning, tenderizes, and helps keep baked goods moist. In addition, recipes are created based on how sweet sugar is, but many of the alternatives are much sweeter so you must alter the amount you use. Finally, not all sweeteners are heat safe, meaning they lose their sweetness at high temperatures. They cannot be used in baking but are fine for no-bake recipes or can be added after cooking. Check out the sidebar to find out which sweetener does what.

Whichever sweeteners you choose, a good rule of thumb is to use them sparingly. ♣

— Heidi Reichenberger McIndoo,  
MS, RD, LDN

## AT A GLANCE

- **Aspartame:** not heat stable, 6 packets = ¼ cup sugar
- **Saccharin:** heat stable, 6 packets = ¼ cup sugar; only recommended to replace up to one-half of sugar in recipe
- **Stevia:** heat stable, 3½ tablespoons = ½ cup sugar; recommended to replace all but ¼ cup sugar in recipes. Stevia may require a lower baking temperature and more baking time. A baking blend available under the Truvia brand name is a combination of Truvia and sugar.
- **Sucralose:** heat stable, granular form 1 cup = 1 cup sugar; use granular form when baking. Note that foods bake faster with sucralose than with sugar.