

The sweet life: many nutritionists believe low-calorie sweeteners can play a role in helping teens live a healthy lifestyle

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My daughter, Rebecca, 16, wouldn't dream of getting through the day without low-calorie sweeteners and sugar-free products. She stirs Splenda into her morning tea, snacks on Dannon Light & Fit yogurt at lunch, chews Orbit gum when she's studying, and usually has Diet Coke at the movies. "They taste good but don't have all the calories of sugar," Rebecca says. She's calorie-conscious and relies on sugar substitutes to satisfy her sweet tooth while staying trim and cavity-free. But sometimes Rebecca worries about how healthy those products really are.

Safe Substitutes

Like Rebecca, maybe you've heard rumors linking some low-calorie sweeteners to cancer, weight gain, and toxic substances. It's true that artificial sweeteners have had their share of naysayers. For example, saccharin was suspected of causing cancer, but food regulators removed a warning to that effect in 2000. Another sweetener, cyclamate, was linked to cancer in lab animals and removed from U.S. store shelves decades ago, but it's still available overseas.

However, recent research confirms the safety of sugar substitutes you see in those blue, yellow, and pink packets on restaurant tabletops. These alternatives include:

- * Sucralose (brand name Splenda);
- * Aspartame (brand names Equal and NutraSweet);
- * Saccharin (brand names Sweet'N Low and SugarTwin);
- * Acesulfame-K (brand names Sunett and Sweet One)

Those substances also sweeten most sugar-free foods and beverages.

All have been deemed safe by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). (Warning: People with phenylketonuria--a genetic inability to process the chemical phenylalanine--should avoid products with aspartame, which produces the problem chemical in the body.) In addition, the National Cancer Institute reports that there is no evidence these sugar substitutes increase the risk of cancer. The jury is still out on Truvia, a sweetener made from the dietary supplement stevia.

Many nutritionists believe low-calorie sweeteners can play a role in helping teens live healthy lifestyles. "It's always going to be better to balance out your diet and not eat or drink too many sugary foods," says Ruth Kava, director of nutrition for the American Council on Science and Health. "If you tend to eat a lot of

sugar-filled goodies and drinks, then choosing products with low-calorie sweeteners at least some of the time is a good way to cut calories."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

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Marilyn Tanner-Blasiar, a pediatric dietitian and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, agrees. "Weight management is a big issue for teens, and one little piece of the weight management puzzle is controlling calories while enjoying the taste of food," she comments. "Drinking diet soda and choosing sugar-free yogurt [are ways] to cut total calories while keeping your taste buds happy."

Making Healthy Choices

The numbers speak for themselves. There are about 150 calories in a regular 12-ounce soft drink versus no calories in a diet soft drink. One spoonful of sugar adds 16 calories to a bowl of cereal, while a packet of a sugar substitute adds next to none.

But don't let artificially sweetened foods replace healthier choices. "Everything in moderation," cautions Tanner-Blasiar. Enjoying one or two diet drinks a day is OK. More than that and you're probably not drinking as much water or calcium- and vitamin-enriched milk as you should be. Satisfy your sweet tooth with artificially sweetened products and you might be skipping other sweet yet nutritious foods, such as fruit.

Even significantly overweight teens should aim for moderation while learning how to make healthy choices and live a more active lifestyle.

Tanner-Blasiar counsels overweight teens at St. Louis Children's Hospital, helping them figure out how to fit low-calorie sweeteners into their eating plans: "Some kids come in and tell me they drink a six-pack of soda every day or two or three [giant] drinks. It would be a shock to go from [those] to plain water." So the first step for those teens is cutting back by switching to a diet soft drink, sugar-free lemonade, or low-calorie flavored water.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Other Health Pluses

Low-calorie sweeteners and sugar-free products can also play a part in keeping your teeth healthy. That's because sugar contributes to tooth decay that can cause cavities, but 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 sugarless varieties. A note of caution: Most sugarless gums are made with low-calorie sweeteners known as sugar alcohols (such as sorbitol and xylitol). If you tend to have a sensitive stomach or chew excessive amounts of sugar-free gum, those

chemicals may cause gas, bloating, or diarrhea.

Low-calorie sweeteners also allow diabetics to safely enjoy a bigger 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 "to fit in and have a soda with everyone else."

One Way to Go

My daughter appreciates the options too. When she knows we're headed to a restaurant featuring one of her favorite chocolate desserts, she snacks on sugar-free gelatin or flavored yogurt earlier in the day. And lately, Rebecca has been talking about baking chocolate-chip cookies with Splenda. Sounds sweet to me!

Before Reading

* Ask students whether they have wondered about the health value or safety of sugar substitutes.

Discuss

* Name four common sugar substitutes. (sucralose, aspartame, saccharin, and acesulfame-K)

* Why shouldn't teens base their diets on a lot of artificially sweetened products? (They'll miss out on many healthy nutrients from milk, fruit, and other foods.)

* What are some health benefits of artificial sweeteners? (They can help reduce calorie intake, protect teeth from decay, and allow people with diabetes to enjoy sweet foods and beverages.)

Resource

* The Taste of Sweet: Our Complicated Love Affair with Our Favorite Treats, by Joanne Chen (Crown, 2008)

Substitute Subtraction

Directions: Read the article "The Sweet Life" (page 8). Then it's your turn to figure out how artificial sweeteners measure up against products made with sugar. Consider the following example of two 6-ounce yogurts--the diet one uses sugar substitutes, and the other one uses sugar.

1. What is the difference in calories between the two products?

2. What would the total difference in calories be if you ate two servings per day?

3. Assume that the answer to question 1 represents all the sugar in the full-sugar yogurt. One teaspoon of

sugar measures about 16 calories. How many teaspoons of sugar are in the full-sugar yogurt?

4. To gain one pound in weight, you have to consume about 3,500 calories more than you burn through exercise and daily living. If you added one of the full-sugar yogurts to your diet every day, how many days would it take for your weight to increase by one pound?

5. If you added one of the diet yogurts to your diet every day, how many days would it take for your weight to increase by one pound?

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

Answers

1. 70 calories, 2. 140 calories, 3. 4.4 teaspoons, 4. about 21 days, 5. 35 days;

Bonus: Now it gets tricky! Calculate the difference in calories between the two types of yogurt if a person eats one full-sugar serving every day for a year.

Answer

25,550 calories' difference, equal to 7.3 pounds.

Divide that amount by 3,500 for the difference in pounds that person could gain in a year.

Which Is Where? A brief list of the sweeteners in some of your favorite sugar-free foods and drinks Food/Drink Artificial Sweetener Diet soft drinks (most kinds) aspartame Dasani, Aquafina, and [Fruit.sub.2]0 flavored waters sucralose Propel water sucralose and acesulfame-K Crystal Light aspartame and acesulfame-K Sugar-free Jell-0 gelatin aspartame and acesulfame-K Sugar-free Jell-0 pudding sucralose and acesulfame-K Yoplait Light yogurt aspartame Dannon Light &Fit yogurt sucralose, aspartame, and acesulfame-K Edy's Slow Churned sucralose, maltitol, sorbitol, No Sugar Added ice cream acesulfame-K, lactitol 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. [ILLUSTRATION OMITTED] Sugar Brand Times Sweeter Substitute Name Than Sugar Aspartame NutraSweet, Equal 200 Acesulfame-K Sweet One, Sunett 200 Saccharin Sweet'N Low, SugarTwin 300 Sucralose Splenda 600 Source: International Food Information Council Foundation

Markarian, Margie

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