

All That Is Sweet

What You Need to Know About Sweeteners

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Let me start with some true confessions. I grew up as a sugar junkie. I suppose when I look back on it, I'd have to say my Mother was a sugar junkie too. Though truthfully, I probably expanded on her addiction in a significant way, as following generations normally do. And now that I think about it, my grandma was a sugar junkie too. Turns out I'm from a long line of sugar junkies.

There are so many "genetic" tendencies that we all inherit. In any case, science will call it genetics when the whole line of the family shows up over time with diabetes or depression or high blood fats and heart disease. But more often than not, what we've actually inherited is a long list of unexamined lifestyle habits. Eating sugar is a good example.

So back to my confessions. Although I was blessed to have a mother who home-cooked from scratch "three square meals" a day for our household, I was also blessed with a mother who home-cooked the accompanying desserts for each meal. And for snacks and for treats and for special occasions and for a "little something" before bedtime. And in the summer, when my family ran a little resort on Woman Lake in northern Minnesota, I also had free access to all the sugars we kept for the guests: coca cola and all the other soda pops, candy bars, ice cream bars, bubble gum, etc. I ate them all day long.

By the time I was in high school, I was experiencing hypoglycemic episodes on a regular basis. My pancreas had been thoroughly worn out! Do you know what hypoglycemic episodes are? No one did when I was growing up in rural, back woods Minnesota in the 1960's and early 1970's. I think most people just thought I was an "ornery" kid; I know I did. Experiences like an irrational, overpowering urge to eat, raging headaches, bad cases of the shakes, and severely fluctuating moods were very common for me. Needless to say, those kinds of symptoms don't usually result in a happy-go-lucky attitude.

Many years later, after my symptoms had worsened to the point of 24-hour headaches, weight problems, and passing out, I was fortunate enough to find a nutritionist who knew what the problem was. Within 2 days of changing my diet, I felt like a new person.

So what's the problem with sugar? Well first of all, what is sugar? In this country today, for most people sugar is the white granules they put on their cereal in the morning, and in their coffee, and on their grapefruit, and on and on. Those white granules are refined sucrose, which is produced by a series of chemical processes performed on the juice of the sugar cane or sugar beet. All fiber and protein from those plants are removed in the process, which normally account for nearly 90% of the plant. Refined sucrose is not a product of nature.

What is left after all of the chemical processing of these plants is a high calorie, non-nutritional, habit-forming taste.

Like most prescription drugs, that sweet taste wouldn't be such a terrible thing if it didn't have such a long list of negative side effects associated with it. Here is a beginning list of those side effects:

- The acidification of the entire biochemistry of the body
 - (The blood stream of the human body functions optimally with a slightly alkaline pH so acidification forces a cascade of compensatory biochemistry results all of which have negative impacts.)
- The leaching of vitamins and minerals to attempt to alkalinize the body's pH. (This is the association with gum disease and ultimately, osteoporosis, but of course, the reduction in vitamins and minerals can cause problems in all aspects of body functioning.)

- The inflammation of tissues resulting from acidification (often resulting in pain and increased pain).
- The weakening of connective tissues from acidification (often resulting in weakened ligaments, back problems, etc.).
- The creation of a low pH environment in the body, which is an anaerobic or low oxygen environment, makes a hospitable environment for pathogenic bacteria as well as for cancer cells.
- The stimulation of insulin secretion, resulting in weight gain.
- The increase in fatty acids (especially triglycerides) in organs and in the blood stream (often resulting in blood pressure problems, cardiovascular disease, circulatory problems, etc.)
- The reduction in immune function.
- The reduction in the number of friendly bacteria in the intestinal tract and the increase in the number of “un-friendly” bacteria as well as yeast. (Because friendly bacteria contribute B vitamins to the body and because B vitamins have so many important roles such as mood stabilization and brain functioning, the depletion of friendly bacteria can impact negatively on emotional states).
- An increase in PMS and menstrual pain resulting from depleted vitamins and minerals.

Well, the list can go on and on, but I hope you’re getting the idea of the far-reaching negative side effects of sugar consumption. It is essentially a bio-chemical poison, not unlike alcohol, in the body. You can read more about the details of these problems in William Dufty’s classic book, Sugar Blues, (1975, Warner Books).

You should also know that refined sugars are essentially very well hidden in most of the foods you can buy at the grocery store. READ labels for these words:

- Sucrose (as described above)
- Fructose or High Fructose (fruit sugar)
- Dextrose or Corn Sugar (produced synthetically from starch)
- Maltose (malt sugar)
- Lactose (milk sugar)

Often, you will notice that the first 3 ingredients in any given product will include 3 of these forms of sugar. STAY AWAY from these products as much as possible!

You are probably also aware of the low calorie sweeteners such as Nutrasweet, Equal, Neotame Spoonful, etc. This kind of sweetener is also known generically as aspartame. Aspartame is made up of phenylalanine, aspartic acid, and wood alcohol*. Phenylalanine and aspartic acid are amino acids. In combination with other amino acids they can be considered natural and harmless. Alone, they enter the blood stream and central nervous system in abnormally high concentrations and have neuro-toxic effects resulting in headaches, mental confusion, mood problems, and even potentially, seizures. They are also likely to increase the generation of free radicals, which have been linked to most degenerative disease (coronary artery disease, arthritis, cancer, etc.) But worse than these problems are those associated with the consumption of wood alcohol. The EPA safe consumption limit for methanol (wood alcohol) is 7.8 milligrams per day. A one-liter beverage sweetened with aspartame (e.g. any diet drink such as diet colas, etc.) contains approximately 56 milligrams of wood alcohol. Methanol poisoning is associated with vision impairment leading to blindness.

Shall we all say it together: STAY AWAY from aspartame!

Well if you stayed with me this long, you deserve to hear some good news. There are sweeteners that are healthier than the ones mentioned above. They are healthier because they are in their natural form, complete with nature’s complex of vitamins, minerals, proteins, fiber, etc. These include:

* You can access the research on aspartame through the nonprofit organization Aspartame Consume Safety Network at PO Box 780634, Dallas, TX 75378, (214) 352-4268.

- Maple syrup
- Date sugar
- Brown rice syrup
- Barley malt syrup
- Raisin juice
- Ripe bananas
- Molasses
- Honey

Any of these items can be used in cooking to sweeten recipes or as additives to beverages, etc. Cheryl Townsley's cookbooks do a good job of making use of healthy sweeteners.* Keep in mind, these foods are still very sweet, and will still tend to produce the same problems mentioned above. Keep any of these sweet foods to a small portion of your diet.

And saving the best for last is a sweetener called stevia. Stevia is a plant that is extremely sweet. It does not have the effect on insulin that any of the other sweeteners have. Some natural health practitioners actually prescribe stevia as a part of a protocol to reduce blood sugar. Just ½ tsp. of stevia can replace 1 full cup of white refined sugar, and 1 tsp. of sugar is equal to 1/32 tsp. of stevia powder. It can be purchased in a white powder form that looks a lot like refined white sugar. It also comes in a liquid form or of course, in its natural state, which is dried green leaf.

My own story has a fairly happy ending regarding sugar. My hypoglycemia has been well under control for nearly 15 years now. I know my pancreas has recovered tremendously because I can survive the skipping of a meal now without passing out (though I seldom make this test now that I know how important regular protein and fiber are to blood sugar balancing). My weight has long since stabilized itself to an optimal level. That awful panic that came with a drop in blood sugar and its subsequent blind search for food, is of course, gone. Which means, I'm much easier to live with.

I do still like sweet things and struggle to keep them to a minimum in my diet. The big change is that it takes very, very much less of them to satisfy me. On my web page, www.sherrydell.com, you can find a section called "Tricking the Sweet Tooth Fairy." These are some of the solutions I've come up with to satisfy my sweet tooth, now that I'm basically weaned off the main-lining of sugar that I used to do. If you're eating sugar the way I used to, you'll just have to take me at my word because you won't believe the following sentence, though I promise I've seen it to be true for myself and many, many, many others. There will be a day when a grape will be just as satisfying to your sweet tooth as a brownie is today.

* Lifestyle for Health Cookbook is my favorite (available through www.lifestyleforhealth.com)