

Ask a Nutritionist

by Tara Postnikoff



Q. Do artificial sweeteners really **make you crave sugar** and lead to weight gain?

A Artificial sweeteners are laboratory-created intense sweeteners with no calories. They are many times sweeter than regular sugar and go by names such as aspartame (Nutrasweet, Equal), sucralose (Splenda), saccharin (Sweet 'N Low, Sugar Twin), acesulfame potassium (Ace-K, Sunett) and neotame. Most packaged or processed products marked “sugar-free” or “low-calorie” contain one or more artificial sweeteners, and over 85% of Americans are consuming these products. Sugar alcohols are another type of sweetener, and while they are generally deemed more “natural” and not as sweet as the artificial ones, they can cause gas, diarrhea and blood sugar spikes.

Artificial sweeteners, originally intended for those who couldn't tolerate sugar (such as diabetics) are now marketed as “healthy” substitutes. However, products containing artificial sweeteners have been linked to headaches, anxiety, increased bad bacteria in the gut, weight gain, increased cravings and other problems. While studies may have ruled these products to be safe for use in small amounts, we don't know the impact that large amounts will have over many years of consumption. As in other areas, it's all about balance. If you have a small amount of artificial sweetener and the rest of your diet and lifestyle are healthy, your body should be able to process this additional chemical. However, if you are a non-exerciser who consumes processed food and artificial sweeteners regularly, health concerns may arise.

A study in the *Journal of Physiology and Behaviour* showed that artificial sweeteners can produce changes in appetite, with aspartame showing the most pronounced effects. A 2010 paper in *Neuroscience* found increasing evidence through MRI data to suggest that artificial sweeteners do not stimulate the brain's food-reward pathways in the same way as natural sweeteners. This same paper also states that there have been several large-scale studies that have found a positive correlation between artificial sweeteners and weight gain.

Other studies (on animals) found that artificial sweeteners disable the body's ability to regulate food intake, leading to greater weight gain due to increased consumption of calories. Animals seek food to satisfy their energy needs, and without complete satisfaction (i.e. sweetness without calories), food-seeking behaviour is continued.

The over-stimulation caused by the intense sweeteners and frequent use of artificial sweeteners can result in decreased appreciation for naturally sweet foods, such as fruit. Similarly, it may decrease our enjoyment of other foods that don't super-stimulate the senses in the way that artificial sweeteners do. Additionally, we may be prone to thinking that if we are not getting the extra calories by consuming a sugar-free beverage, then it's okay to have the additional calories elsewhere.

I think it's time for a change in mentality. No-calorie foods are non-nutritious by definition, as they do not contain nutrients. So if you are seeking a sweet taste, instead of artificial sweeteners, why not try natural ones such as honey or maple syrup in low doses,

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or try an herb called stevia (just make sure it's minimally processed). In baking, you can sometimes substitute applesauce, bananas or dried fruit in order to reduce the sugar content in common recipes. After reducing your sugar intake, your taste buds will appreciate the natural sweetness of foods and will regain sensitivity to sugar, allowing you to feel satisfied on less. A final note: sugars shouldn't make up more than 5% of your daily calories (i.e. 100 calories or 25 grams if you are consuming a 2000 calorie diet; 150 calories or 38 grams if consuming a 3000 calorie diet). **RR**

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