Alternative sweeteners

People living with diabetes can include small amounts of sugar as part of a healthy eating plan. While alternative sweeteners are not necessary, some people may still choose to use these to add sweetness without adding sugar and kilojoules.

If you choose to use sweeteners, be aware that swapping sugar for a sweetener in a recipe – or buying products labelled ‘sugar-free’ – does not guarantee they are a healthy choice, or that they won’t affect your blood glucose levels. Always check the nutrition information to make sure the product meets your needs or discuss this with a dietitian.

If you use sugar, remember to only use a small amount, such as a teaspoon of sugar in a cup of tea or coffee, a teaspoon of honey on porridge or a thin spread of jam on toast.

Facts about sweeteners

- All of the sweeteners approved for sale in Australia have been tested and deemed safe for use by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ).
- These sweeteners may be used in food and drinks to replace sugar and can be identified in products by their name or a code number.
- Some sweeteners known as modified sugars and sugar/sweetener blends are suitable alternatives to sugar but these products contain kilojoules and will still have an effect on blood glucose levels.

Alternative sweeteners are not suitable for everyone. People living with the condition ‘phenylketonuria’ need to avoid alternative sweeteners, including aspartame (951). They are also not recommended for infants and young children. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, discuss the use of alternative sweeteners with a dietitian.

People with diabetes who use insulin or certain blood glucose lowering medications are at risk of hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose levels). Products containing alternative sweeteners, such as diet soft drinks, diet cordial or sugar free lollies should not be used to treat hypoglycaemia.
**Are all sweeteners the same?**

No, not all sweeteners are the same: there are three groups of alternative sweeteners, which all have different effects on blood glucose levels and weight.

You can identify the different types of sweeteners by their code number in the ingredients list on food packaging.

1. **Non-nutritive sweeteners**

Non-nutritive sweeteners (also known as ‘artificial’ or ‘intense’ sweeteners), include aspartame, sucralose and stevia. They do not contain carbohydrate and are low in kilojoules. ‘Diet’ or ‘low-joule’ products often use non-nutritive sweeteners instead of sugar.

**Examples include:**
- Sucralose (955), eg Splenda
- Aspartame (951), eg Equal, Sugarless
- Saccharin (954), eg Sugarella
- Acesulfame-K or Ace-K (950), eg Hermesetas
- Stevia or Steviol Glycoside (960), eg Natvia

2. **Nutritive sweeteners**

Nutritive sweeteners contain carbohydrate and may have just as many kilojoules as regular sugar. These include sugar alcohols and alternative natural sweeteners such as agave, rice malt syrup and fructose. They can still have an effect on your blood glucose levels so, like sugar, they are best used in small amounts.

Sugar alcohols may be found in products labelled ‘carbohydrate modified’. If eaten in large amounts, these sweeteners can have a laxative effect and can cause bloating, wind and diarrhoea. Check the label of sweetened products for warnings.

**Examples include:**
- Sorbitol (420)
- Mannitol (421)
- Xylitol (965)
- Maltitol (967)
- Fructose (eg Fruisana)

3. **Modified sugars and sugar/sweetener blends**

These sweeteners are either a combination of sugar and an alternative sweetener or sugar that has been modified to have a lower glycemic index (GI). These products are suitable alternatives, but they contain kilojoules and will still have some effect on blood glucose levels.

**Examples include:**
- CSR LoGlcane (a modified cane sugar with a low GI)
- CSR Smart Sugar (a blend of cane sugar and Stevia)
When to use a sweetener

Water is the best drink but, as an occasional substitute, diet soft drinks and cordials may add variety without contributing excess sugar and kilojoules. If you are concerned about the sugar in foods like jelly or yoghurt, you might want to think about using an artificially sweetened product.

Some products containing alternative sweeteners may still be high in saturated fat (such as ‘sugar-free’ chocolate) and are not suitable to include as part of a healthy eating plan.

If you are concerned about the amount of sugar needed in a recipe, try reducing the amount of sugar recommended, modify the ingredients or use an alternative sweetener as a substitute.

Swapping sugar for a sweetener can affect the taste and texture of cooking so, for best results, refer to the packaging and choose one that suits your needs.

For more information about alternative sweeteners, visit www.foodstandards.gov.au

For more information about alternative sweeteners speak to a dietitian.

The NDSS and you

The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Infoline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.