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One of the things I am asked about most as a nutritional therapist and health coach is sugar substitutes. "Surely honey is healthy?" I am asked, so here's the low down on some of those sugar replacements you might think are healthy (and some that definitely aren't).

Honey

Honey has a lot going for it in some regards. It contains amino acids, electrolytes and antioxidants, and antimicrobial compounds that can support your health. To get these extra benefits, you'll want to choose a raw (unprocessed) local honey. It may also help relieve allergy symptoms, specifically hayfever, because the bees feast on the local pollen, and taking raw local honey can help you develop natural immunity over time. But, whichever way you cut it, honey is sugar. It may be natural, but sugar it is, and it behaves that way in your body, spiking blood sugar exactly as actual sugar would.

Dates

Dates are a popular feature of many paleo or natural sugar-free bars, because they are naturally very sweet. They have the highest nutritional benefit of all natural sweeteners, because they also contain minerals like selenium, copper, potassium and magnesium, as well as providing fibre to slow the speed at which the sugars hit your bloodstream. Medjool dates have featured heavily in many a trendy recipe book. These are sweeter and tend to be softer than regular dates. However dates, too, raise blood sugar levels and trigger insulin release.

Maple syrup

This is one of the best sugar substitutes (if indeed you need to use any) because it contains antioxidants (24 in fact), which are helpful in the fight against cell-damaging free radicals. There is absolutely no nutritional value to actual sugar. While studies show maple syrup does not spike your blood sugar levels as much, it is still wise to use sparingly. You'll want grade A

(lighter in flavour) or B (nutritionally better and with a more intense flavour). Avoid maple flavoured syrups as these are not the same.

Coconut sugar

Coconut sugar has become very trendy of late and brings a lovely caramel flavour to your food. It is perfect for baking with and has a lesser impact on your blood sugar levels than regular sugar, but it is still sugar, so use sparingly.

Palmyra Jaggery

You may not even have heard of this, but it's the crystalized nectar collected from the flower of the Palmyra palm. You use it exactly as you would sugar, and often you can reduce the amount needed by up to a half. It's packed with B vitamins and has a much lower GL than table sugar.

Brown rice syrup

This has found its way into 'healthy' recipes. It's made from fermented, cooked rice. It's not a particularly good option as a sweetener as it's highly processed, contains very little in the way of nutrition benefits and the effect on blood sugar is almost identical to standard sugar.

Agave syrup

Agave syrup comes from a cactus, and the syrup is made from the pulp of the leaf. It's very highly processed and is mainly fructose, which needs to be processed by the liver, causing more stress for an already over-worked organ. Fructose is actually worse for you than glucose. Agave syrup (or nectar) is very similar to the (deservedly) much-demonised high fructose corn syrup, that has contributed greatly to the obesity epidemic in the US. My advice? Do not use it!

[Table sugar (sucrose) is 50% glucose, 50% fructose.]

Stevia

This is another natural sweetener. There a number of different types of stevia, and ideally you want full, green leaf stevia that is unadulterated with other sweeteners. Pure stevia will not unbalance your blood sugar levels, thus avoiding an energy rollercoaster.

Xylitol

Often found in the UK under the brand names Total Sweet or Xyla, xylitol is a sugar alcohol. It's a little sweeter than sugar, has fewer calories and (the important part) 75% less carbohydrate, so the impact of blood sugar levels is lower than it would be if you were to eat the same amount compared to real sugar. It's the same stuff used in sugar free chewing gum, thanks to its antibacterial properties. The downside is it is very highly processed, and some people can be sensitive to large amounts and may find their stools a little loose, or they get bloated, if they eat too much. Note as well that it is toxic for dogs.

Artificial sweeteners (like aspartame and saccharin)

People usually resort to artificial sweeteners in a bid to cut calories. This is bad news for a number of reasons, but I'll mention the two biggies here: Research into some of them shows a correlation with cancer (weak, perhaps, and refuted by the food industry, but personally I'm not taking any chances). Secondly, nutrition science conclusively proves that weight gain/ loss has little to do with calories in and out but what happens hormonally inside the body – how much insulin your body makes (insulin being the fat storage hormone that also sabotages fat burning). Recent research shows that these artificial sweeteners can increase blood sugar (and consequently insulin) levels more than normal sugar. So really, what is the point? My advice is to stop now ...

BUT...

The very best scenario of all is that you wean yourself off sweeteners of any kind as this helps you appreciate and embrace natural sweetness from real food. If you continue to eat sweet things, your taste buds will always want sweet things. It's as simple as that. If you need a sugar fix, find it in real, natural foods.

It's also worth considering phasing out not only sugary foods, but checking the labels on convenience foods to see where sugar has been added. If your diet has traditionally been quite high in the white stuff, the first few weeks can be a little tricky as your body (and brain and taste buds) starts to adjust – but bear with it.

* Deliciously Ella's Cinnamon Pecan Granola

<https://deliciouslyella.com/nutty-cinnamon-granola>