

Naturally Sweet

Replace sugar with these alternatives and you could boost your health while satisfying that sweet tooth

By Cindy Klinger

“Sweetie” and “sugar” may be popular terms of endearment, but they’re no friends to our waistlines or our health. Sugar and corn syrup, particularly high-fructose corn syrup, wreak havoc on our bodies, putting them under unnecessary stress and contributing to all sorts of illnesses, from headaches and diabetes to high cholesterol and cancer. Yet we Americans can’t get enough sweet treats; we consume an estimated 63 pounds of cane and beet sugar and 59 pounds of high-fructose corn syrup per year, according to the USDA/Economic Research Service. “Craving sugar is an indicator that there’s something missing in your life or your diet,” says Nelson Bulmash, a chiropractor, clinical nutritionist and naturopath and the founder of Health Matters in Alpharetta. Luckily, there are sweeteners that are gentler on our system, and many even supply the body with small doses of enzymes, minerals and vitamins. Even with natural alternatives, Bulmash recommends buying organic and raw products and using them sparingly. That being said, here is a selection of sugar alternatives we think are pretty sweet.

Agave Nectar

This honey-like syrup comes from the Mexican agave cactus plant, the same shrub from which tequila is made. It’s actually sweeter than honey, but not quite as thick or flavorful. Choose from darker and lighter versions, which vary slightly in richness. Often used for diabetics because it doesn’t raise blood sugar levels as much as other sweeteners, agave nectar is ideal to use as a sweetener in tea or coffee, or for baking.

Did you know? Unlike honey, agave nectar is a 100-percent vegan product. Similarly to honey, however, agave burns more easily than sugar, so it’s wise to lower the oven temperature about 10 to 25 degrees when baking with it.

Barley Malt

Barley malt is one of the mildest sweeteners, made by converting barley’s starch into a sugar via fermentation. You can find it in a powder or syrup form. Because it’s not as sweet as sugar, you may find you have to use more of it than you would sugar in recipes, or combine it with other sweeteners. Bulmash says it’s often mixed with corn syrup, so be sure to scour the label.

Did you know? Barley malt is considered to be more of a whole-food than many of the other sweeteners on the market.

Blackstrap Molasses

Blackstrap molasses is one of a few types of molasses, and is made from the third round of boiling the juice from the sugar cane plant. Unlike refined sugars, blackstrap molasses is not very sweet and contains significant amounts of vitamins and minerals like calcium,

iron, magnesium and potassium. Its versatility allows it to be used for industrial purposes as well as a health supplement.

Did you know?

Many people claim to reverse their graying hair by consuming blackstrap molasses. This is probably because the sweetener contains copper, and copper deficiency can cause premature grayness. It also is believed to help relieve a host of other ailments, including acne and anemia.

Brown Rice Syrup

Created by culturing cooked rice with enzymes to break down the starches, brown rice syrup is a mix of complex carbohydrates, maltose and glucose. This blend provides the body with a steady stream of energy for up to about three hours. Its slightly caramel-like flavor adds a subtle sweetness to baked goods, although you might have to use up to 50 percent more brown rice syrup than you would sugar.

Did you know? Brown rice syrup is used in many organic health food bars as a replacement for sugar.

Date Sugar

Date sugar is technically not a sugar; made from ground, dried dates, it contains vitamins, minerals and fiber found in the fruit. A wonderful substitute for brown sugar, it can be used in equal parts for sugar in most recipes. However, it's not recommended for diabetics, because the dried fruit affects one's blood sugar.

Did you know? Because the small pieces of dates don't dissolve, date sugar can't effectively be used to sweeten drinks like tea or coffee.

Honey

One of the oldest natural sweeteners, honey is actually sweeter than sugar and can have different subtleties in its taste, depending on the variety of the plant source. Darker-colored honeys tend to have a higher mineral content and contain more antioxidants. Raw honey is the healthiest, since it contains the most enzymes, minerals and vitamins. Because it's sweeter than sugar, you can use less of it when replacing sugar in a recipe.

Did you know? There are some 300 varieties of honey in the U.S. alone, so there's no excuse to get bored of the flavor.

Stevia

Available in powder form and liquid concentrates, stevia is derived from a plant and is a safe option for diabetics and those with hypoglycemia. Because its flavor is similar to licorice and it can have a slightly bitter taste, some people don't like the taste of stevia. And because stevia is up to 300 times sweeter than sugar, you'll need much less to get the same amount of sweetness. But because stevia has a different consistency than sugar, it might not work in all your recipes; you'll have to experiment to see what works. Because it's not approved by the FDA (many believe this is solely because of the political power

of the sweetener industry rather than the actual safety of stevia), it's sold as a dietary supplement rather than a sweetener.

Did you know? Stevia is calorie-free, and has a negligible negative effect on blood sugar. In fact, it may actually help in regulating blood-sugar levels.

Experiment with these and other natural sweeteners to decide which ones you like best—some might be better suited for baking, while others might be used to enhance your daily cup of tea. Also keep in mind that some sweeteners are okay for diabetics and those watching their blood sugar, while others remain off limits. Do your research, use them sparingly and above all, have fun taste testing!

Cindy Klinger is a holistic health counselor and freelance writer who admittedly likes the sweeter things in life.