

 **Children's Health Tip
of the Day**

Sugar and Sugar Substitutes

We are all born with a sweet tooth. In fact, studies show that shortly after birth, infants show a preference for sweet solutions. But a propensity for sweetness can lead to a propensity toward obesity – a growing problem in this country.

Sugar substitutes

Americans are increasingly turning to sugar substitutes in an effort to cut down on the amount of sugar they consume while satisfying their sweet tooth. Artificial sweeteners can be found in everything from the soda we drink and foods we eat to the gum we chew and medicines we take. But, how safe are they for our children?

Safety of sweeteners

In spite of Internet headlines screaming that artificial sweeteners are the cause of numerous diseases, childhood cancers, seizures, multiple sclerosis, lupus – even Gulf War syndrome – government agencies and medical organizations have found them to be generally safe for most Americans.

Organizations that give sugar substitutes a thumbs-up include the American Dietetic Association, the American Heart Association and the American Diabetes Association. These organizations endorse the use of those products because they make food taste sweet, but they have essentially no calories and do not raise blood sugar levels. Sugar substitutes may help diabetics and overweight patients to better comply with dietary restrictions.

Another plus is that artificial sweeteners do not cause dental cavities.

The sugar substitute line-up

The most popular artificial sweeteners are:

- **Aspartame.** Also called NutraSweet™ or Equal™, this sweetener was approved by the FDA in 1981. While critics contend it causes everything from cancer to seizures, the FDA says that more than 100 toxicological and clinical studies confirm that aspartame is safe for the general population. The American Medical Association concurs, adding that there has been no evidence to link aspartame with any disease.

An exception is the small segment of the population who has phenylketonuria (PKU), a rare, hereditary metabolic disease. People with PKU cannot metabolize phenylalanine, and can suffer brain damage from a buildup of the amino acid.

- **Sucralose.** After reviewing more than 110 animal and human safety studies conducted over 20 years, the FDA approved Sucralose – known more commonly as Splenda TM – in 1998.
- **Saccharin.** This is the oldest and perhaps most controversial artificial sweetener on the market. The most recognizable name is Sweet 'n Low TM, and it is used in many food and beverage products. While it has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory animals, questions still linger about whether saccharin may cause cancer in humans. The sweetener carries a label that warns of its potential risks.

Satisfy a sweet tooth naturally

While the overall opinion is that sugar substitutes are fine for children if used in moderation, many health officials take the view that the less “artificial” substances your children put into their bodies, the healthier they will be. If you want to satisfy a sweet tooth, and still cut down on the sugar and artificial sweetener you use, try the following suggestions:

- Use fruit concentrates, such as pear or apple. Use about half the amount of fruit concentrate as sugar in a recipe.
- Sprinkle on some cinnamon. Cinnamon is a sweet spice, and a small amount goes a long way. Sprinkle it on your child’s morning oatmeal or breakfast cereal.
- Use other sweet spices. Experiment with mint, cloves, anise and ginger.
- Top it off with fruit. Use crushed pineapple, applesauce, strawberries or blueberries instead of syrup on pancakes and waffles. Top some plain yogurt with fruit for a low-sugar treat.
- Make homemade soda using a little fruit juice or fruit juice concentrate and seltzer.

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