



Food Pantries of Centre County

Newsletter—Winter 2020



3 Benefits of Cutting Back on Artificial Sweeteners

The message for us to cut back on sugar is loud and clear. The average American eats more than 70 pounds of it per person, per year. For many, the solution to cut back is a simple one: Swap sugar-filled beverage and food choices with calorie-free, artificially sweetened options. The American Heart Association suggests replacing sugary foods and beverages with artificial sweeteners as a way “to limit calories and achieve or maintain a healthy weight.”

Artificial sweeteners lend sweetness without adding extra calories, but they may not be as beneficial as you’d think. Here are three reasons to think twice before chucking back a can of diet pop:

1- YOU DON’T FEEL FULLY SATISFIED ON ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS

There’s a growing body of evidence to support the idea that people who consume artificial sweeteners may actually end up consuming more calories than those who don’t. Researchers at Yale University School of Medicine discovered that artificial sweeteners don’t signal the release of dopamine, an appetite-controlling hormone. Dopamine is a reward-signaling chemical, meaning it leaves us with feelings of fullness and satisfaction. Artificial sweeteners don’t satisfy the appetite with calories, says Dr. David Ludwig, professor of Nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health. Diet soda might quench your thirst and your immediate craving for something sweet, but it won’t reduce your appetite. Artificial sweeteners may trick the body into thinking it’s about to receive more calories than it actually does, causing people to then compensate for lack of satiety with more food later in the day.

2- YOU DEVELOP A HYPERACTIVE SWEET TOOTH

In addition, frequent use of artificial sweeteners “may limit tolerance for more complex tastes,” explains Ludwig. Think about it: Artificial sweeteners are 200 to 600 times sweeter than sugar. The more of them you eat, the more your body starts to crave these hyper-sweet foods because you develop a higher tolerance for sweetness. Over time, healthy foods like whole-grain products, fruits and vegetables lose their luster. Even naturally sweet foods (think: carrots, apples, beets) don’t taste nearly as sweet, nor satisfying, to people who regularly consume artificially sweetened foods.

3-YOU’RE PROBABLY CHANGING YOUR GUT BACTERIA IN AN UNFAVORABLE WAY

Last year, a team of Israeli scientists found that artificial sweeteners (including aspartame, sucralose and saccharin) may contribute to obesity and diabetes because it disrupts the gut microbiome; a collection of bacteria that help digest food, absorb nutrients, and maintain the inner lining of your digestive system. They influence our risk of obesity, regulate our immune system, and provide us with valuable nutrients.

The study looked at the microbiome and found that artificial sweeteners disrupted the bacterial balance of the digestive system in mice, increasing blood sugar and boosting the growth of a certain gut bacteria that triggered fat storage. There are no calories tied to the fake sugars—leaving nothing to digest—so they pass directly into the gut, affecting the millions of microbes that live there. And while authors of the study caution that the findings are preliminary (mice, after all, do not behave like people and results do not necessarily reflect what happens in humans), many scientists are now interested in the effect of artificial sweeteners on the human microbiome.

SO WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

While artificial sweeteners might save you a handful of calories every now and then, it is important to look at the types of foods and beverages that contain these sweeteners as a whole. Most are highly processed, like sodas and packaged snack foods.

Foods that replace sugar with artificial sweeteners may have fewer calories and appear to be healthier, but are not as healthy as you'd think. Look at the entire package. Stick to wholesome, hearty foods, and satisfy your sweet tooth with foods high in naturally occurring sugar, like fruit and dairy. Sugar-containing foods in their natural form tend to be highly nutritious. You'll not only be full and satisfied, but you'll also benefit from the fiber, protein and calcium inherent to these whole foods.

Still stuck on sweet? Some have more difficulty shaking their sweet tooth than others. Rather than switch to artificially sweetened foods, take a new approach with some of your traditionally sweetened favorites:

Oatmeal: Go savory! Top steel-cut oats with a creamy poached egg, fresh tomatoes and diced avocado.

Coffee: Try a cold brew. It has a much cleaner flavor, so there's less need to temper bitterness with sugar. Or choose a flavored coffee grind, like vanilla or hazelnut with a splash of half-and-half or almond milk.

Yogurt: Stir a tablespoon of nut butter into plain yogurt and top with naturally sweetened fresh fruit.

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