

Dangerously Sweet: The Hidden Hazards in Aspartame

When many of us want to lose weight and avoid sugars, we often turn to artificial sweeteners. Unfortunately, this alternative may be even worse than just using sugar itself.

When we consume artificial sugars, there's the assumption that that food has no calories; therefore we can have more of it. If you were drinking a regular soft drink, for example, you might think: I should probably only drink a little bit of this and not finish the whole thing. If, instead, you are drinking a diet soda, you might think: it's okay to have a Big Mac and large fries with that too since I've already cut calories in my drink.

Even when people aren't eating a Big Mac with their diet soda, they are still gaining weight. Why? After drinking a diet drink, the body starts craving more carbohydrates and, to fill that craving, people tend to eat even more foods that have carbs and sugars. One study done at the University of Texas showed that people who drank one diet soda per day increased their risk of diabetes by 41 percent for that very reason.

Dieters who use artificial sweeteners often blame themselves if they are unable to lose weight, but they don't realize the artificial sugar is the real culprit.

Considering that most artificial sweeteners are 100 to 300 times sweeter than regular sugar, when your tongue tastes something that powerful, it sends a strong signal to the brain that a lot of sugar is coming in. The body's natural response is to secrete an ample amount of insulin in anticipation of the blood sugar spike.

The released insulin normally helps cells in the body take up blood sugar for conversion to energy use or for storage as fat if not needed at the time. But when no actual sugar comes in, the released insulin sends a signal to the brain to trigger hunger and induce cravings for real carbs and sugars so that the insulin can be used up and avoid hypoglycemia.

Just the fact that artificial sweeteners cause people to eat more should be enough to persuade us to stop using them. But these fake sugars cause even more problems.

Let's look at aspartame, for example. It's also known as NutraSweet, Equal or Canderel, and has been around since 1965. It was accidentally discovered by a chemist who was working in the lab on a treatment for ulcers. Aspartame is the addition of two naturally occurring amino acids, aspartate and phenylalanine, to methanol - a simple alcohol that is usually converted to formaldehyde (embalming fluid!) by the liver.

Aspartame is widely used in well over 6000 different products including foods, beverages and drugs despite the continued concerns and complaints about side effects reported to the FDA from consumers since its release. Some of these complaints include

headaches, dizziness, nausea, memory loss and fatigue. Chronic health concerns about aspartame include diseases such as fibromyalgia, lupus, multiple sclerosis and some cancers.

So when we look at aspartame, we see a non-nutritive substance that can make you gain weight, cause you pain and discomfort, add dangerous chemicals to your body and put your health at risk. Is saving a few calories really worth that?

| A better solution is to wean your body of the unnatural craving for sweets, but when you need to satisfy that urge, here are some safer, healthier alternatives:

- Stevia – this sweetener has been around for over 1500 years and has been used extensively in Japan and South America without any major adverse effects. It does not cause your body to release high amount of insulin, so it doesn't cause you to crave carbs and sugars. Rather, it helps in regulating blood sugars.*
- Xylitol – extracted from the birch tree, certain fruits and vegetables. It is approved for use in over 50 countries, and dentists say it actually reduces tooth decay and cavities and has antimicrobial properties. It also has NO after taste.*
- All natural maple syrup—be sure to check the ingredients on the label of this one to be sure you're getting the real thing and not maple-flavored syrup, which is filled with corn syrup. Comes from the sap of the maple tree. Contains minerals such as zinc and manganese.*
- Raw organic honey—check the labels of this one as well, so you don't buy overly processed commercial honey by mistake. Although honey has some of the same properties as sugar, it also has antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and disinfectant properties.*

Aspartame isn't the only artificial sweetener that's too sweet for its own good. Next time, we'll discuss another fake sugar with real hazards: Splenda. (Hint: it may be made from sugar, but “not all that glitters is gold”...)