



FACT SHEET:

Alternative sweeteners

People with diabetes can include small amounts of sugar as part of a healthy eating plan. Alternative sweeteners are not necessary for people with diabetes, but some people may still choose these to add sweetness without adding sugar and kilojoules.

What is an alternative sweetener?

Alternative sweeteners are sugar substitutes. They are used in food and drinks instead of regular table sugar (sucrose). There are different types of alternative sweeteners available. Each of them has different effects on blood glucose levels and weight. You can identify sweeteners by their name or code number.

Alternative sweeteners can be divided into 3 main groups:

- non-nutritive sweeteners
- nutritive sweeteners
- natural intense sweeteners.

1. Non-nutritive sweeteners

Non-nutritive sweeteners are energy (kilojoule or kJ) and carbohydrate (carb) free. They are also known as 'artificial sweeteners'. They are synthetic sugar substitutes and have no nutritional value. People also call them 'intense sweeteners' because they are many times sweeter than sugar.

You can find non-nutritive sweeteners in a wide range of 'diet' or 'low-joule' products in supermarkets. You can also use them to sweeten hot drinks instead of regular sugar.

Non-nutritive sweeteners can have a laxative effect, and cause bloating, wind and diarrhoea when eaten in large amounts.

Non-nutritive sweeteners include:

- Sucralose (955), for example Splenda®
- Aspartame (951), for example Equal®, Sugarless
- Saccharin (954), for example Sugarella®
- Acesulfame-K or Ace-K (950), for example Hermesetas®
- Stevia or Steviol Glycoside (960), for example Natvia®.

2. Nutritive sweeteners

Nutritive sweeteners contain carbs and may have just as many kilojoules as regular sugar. They include sugar alcohols and other natural alternatives to sugar.

Sugar alcohols have a similar structure to sugar but are not as well absorbed by the body. As a result, they taste sweet but have fewer kilojoules and have less impact on blood glucose levels than regular sugar. You will often find sugar alcohols in products labelled 'carbohydrate modified'. Nutritive sweeteners can also have a laxative effect and cause bloating, wind and diarrhoea when eaten in large amounts.

Nutritive sweeteners include:

- Sorbitol (420)
- Mannitol (421)
- Xylitol (967)
- Maltitol (965).

Other nutritive sweeteners that may be used instead of sugar are:

- agave
- rice malt syrup
- maple syrup
- honey
- fructose.

They have a similar energy and carb content to regular table sugar but some such as agave, maple syrup, fructose and some types of honey have a lower glycemic index (GI). Others such as rice syrup have a higher GI. Having low GI means our bodies digest and absorb this sugar more slowly. Choosing low GI foods can improve energy levels and help with managing blood glucose levels.

3. Modified sugars and sugar/sweetener blends

These sweeteners are either a combination of sugar and an alternative sweetener, or sugar that has been modified to have a low GI. These products still contain energy and carb, but the sugar/sweetener blends have less energy and carb than regular sugar.

Modified sugar/sweeteners include:

- CSR LoGlcane®
(a modified cane sugar with a low GI)
- CSR Smart Sugar®
(a blend of cane sugar and Stevia)
- Whole Earth Sweetener Co. Baking Blend®
(a blend of raw sugar and Stevia).

Are alternative sweeteners safe to use?

All alternative sweeteners approved for sale in Australia have been tested and judged to be safe for use by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). Alternative sweeteners are not suitable for everyone. For more information about using alternative sweeteners in your diet, please speak to a dietitian.

Is it better to use alternative sweeteners?

Alternative sweeteners allow people with diabetes to enjoy occasional sweet foods and drinks without causing a rise in blood glucose levels. Some still contain energy and carb and can raise blood glucose levels. Like sugar, it is best to have alternative sweeteners in small amounts.

Some foods that have alternative sweeteners are not always a healthier choice because they are high in saturated fat. Examples include sugar-free chocolate and ice-cream. 'Sugar-free' or 'no added sugar' food and drinks can also raise your blood glucose levels because they have other forms of carb. Always check the label and the nutrition information to make sure the product meets your dietary needs.

If you worry about the amount of sugar needed in a recipe when cooking, try reducing the amount of sugar you add, or modify the ingredients using an alternative sweetener as substitute.



More information and support

- Go to ndss.com.au to search for 'Glycemic index', 'Making healthy food choices', 'Hints for healthy cooking' and 'Understanding food labels' fact sheets.
- For more information about alternative sweeteners, go to foodstandards.gov.au or speak to a dietitian to help you decide the best product choices for you.
- Go to dietitiansaustralia.org.au or call Dietitians Australia on **1800 812 942**.



Top tips

- You do not need to use alternative sweeteners if you have diabetes. But, some types of sweeteners can provide sweetness with less energy and carb than regular sugar.
- There are several different types of sweeteners available and they can have different effects on your blood glucose levels and weight.
- If you choose to use sweeteners, understand that swapping sugar for a sweetener in a recipe, or buying products labelled 'sugar-free', does not guarantee they are a healthy choice, or that they will not affect your blood glucose levels.
- Speak to a dietitian about whether to include alternative sweeteners in your diet and which ones are most suitable for you to use.

Notes

The NDSS and you

Whether you have just been diagnosed with diabetes, or have been living with diabetes for a while, the NDSS provides a range of support services, information, and subsidised products to help you manage your diabetes, stay healthy and live well. For access to more resources (including translated versions), or to find out more about support services, go to ndss.com.au or call the NDSS Helpline on **1800 637 700**.

This information is intended as a guide only. It should not replace individual medical advice and if you have any concerns about your health or further questions, you should contact your health professional.