

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

How Sweet it Isn't

Thinking about sweetening your relationship with your sweetheart? What better way to melt a heart than with the gift of sweets? How sweet it is! Or is it?

I and many others have written often about the innumerable problems associated with the over consumption of refined sugar. Diabetes, obesity, gingivitis, depressed immune function – you name the disease, refined sugar's got a role in it. So what's a sweet tooth to do?

Avoid Artificial Sweeteners

Sounds like a bit of an oxymoron, doesn't it? Avoid sugar while avoiding artificial sweeteners? But bear with me while we follow the thread.

A recent article by Pat Thomas from "The Ecologist" reports that once upon a time, aspartame was listed by the Pentagon as a biochemical warfare agent. Thomas explains:

"Because it contains no calories, aspartame is considered a boon to health-conscious individuals everywhere; and most of us, if we think about it at all, think it is safe. But independent scientists say aspartame can produce a range of disturbing adverse effects in humans, including headaches, memory loss, mood swings, seizures, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's-like symptoms, tumours and even death.

Concerns over aspartame's toxicity meant that for eight years, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) denied it approval,



effectively keeping it off the world market. This caution was based on compelling evidence, brought to light by numerous eminent scientists, litigators and consumer groups, that aspartame contributed to serious central nervous system damage and had been shown to cause cancer in animals. Eventually, however, political muscle, won out over scientific rigour..."

Aspartame, the generic name for Monsanto-owned "NutraSweet", was in fact, approved for limited food use in 1981 and in 1996, after an unconstrained "thumbs up" from the FDA, flourished with its entry into 6000 food and over 500 pharmaceutical products. It turns out that those early studies Thomas referred to were conducted in the 1960's by none other than Searle Pharmaceuticals, later acquired by Monsanto.

Now, if you find this data unimaginable, consider that both the state government of New Mexico and the EU are re-evaluating the safety of aspartame, with legislation banning aspartame in New Mexico currently pending.

Be sweet but healthy

On the other hand, are plenty of healthy sweeteners out there so you've really no excuse to rely on sugar *or* aspartame. Raw honey, for example, is brimming with healthy enzymes and antioxidants, while blackstrap molasses packs a whopping 700 mg. of potassium and a respectable dose of iron in one just tablespoon.

Go to your local health food store and you'll find more sweeteners with names that are probably unfamiliar. Agave nectar, harvested from a pineapple-type plant is a pure, unrefined sweetener with a low glycemic index and a smooth texture that won't solidify. It has approx 1.4 X the sweetening power of white sugar and its mild flavor won't change the taste of your baked goods. In fact, word is out that it lends a moist, silky consistency to the final product, a definite plus in my book.

But the gold medal winner and the one that sits prominently on my own kitchen counter is xylitol. Xylitol is a naturally-occurring substance found in fibrous vegetables and fruit and in hardwood trees like birch. Xylitol is also produced naturally in our bodies; in fact, we produce up to 15 grams of it in our day-to-day metabolism.

Although sugar and xylitol taste and look virtually identical, sugar is really xylitol's evil twin, wreaking havoc on the body, while xylitol, with a low, low glycemic index of 7, repairs and restores. (The glycemic index is a

measure of how much various foods influence blood sugar levels, on a scale of 0-100).

In recent years xylitol has been studied for an array of health benefits, but is probably best known for its positive contribution to dental health. In 1998, in fact, xylitol received accolades in the Journal of the American Dental Association. "Xylitol is an effective preventive agent against dental cavities... Consumption of xylitol containing chewing gum has been demonstrated to reduce cavities in Finnish teenagers by

30-60%. Studies conducted in Canada, Thailand, Polynesia, and Belize have shown similar results.... " In April 2000, the same journal again reported on a second Finnish study. This report showed a striking 70% decrease in tooth decay among children whose mothers chewed xylitol gum.

Can a substance that looks and taste like sugar actually be good for you? Check it out for yourself at <http://www.xylitol.org>.

Meanwhile, know that you can delight in xylitol-sweetened

brownies or cookies without guilt, and without driving up your blood sugar. You see, you really can have your cake and eat it too!

Helayne Waldman, Ed.D , N.E., is a health and nutrition educator, a writer, and an Adjunct Professor in the Dept. of Holistic Health Studies at JFK University. She can be reached at hwaldman@turning-the-tables.com, or on the web at www.turning-the-tables.com