



The Best Safe and Natural Sweeteners

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Sugar, while tempting and pleasurable, comes with many negative impacts on our health. Some of the few include elevating insulin resistance, contributing in the formation of wrinkles and skin aging, inflaming blood vessels and the digestive tract, and causing increased depression by 60%. However, nature has given us a freeway of safe, healthy and delicious substitutes to the chemical powerhouse that is white, refined sugar. Below are the top 5 of the most natural and available options on the market.

1. **Stevia:** A popular favorite in baking substitutions and in everyday chocolate replacements. Stevia is a plant native to South America and Mexico, and the crystals are processed from the leaves into a usable form. It is extremely sweet, about 300 times sweeter than sugar, and has little to no effect on glucose levels, insulin resistance and stands at a whopping 0 calorie count. This sugar replacement is ideal for managing diabetes or hormonal imbalances caused by sugar intake, and excellent for those trying to lose weight and still crave a touch of sweetness in their lives. The only downfall to Stevia is it's bitter and often unpleasant aftertaste, however this can easily be managed by mixing the sweetener with pink Himalayan salt or any other unrefined sea salt.
2. **Sugar Alcohols:** These can range from erythritol, xylitol and sorbitol. Calorie wise, these alcohols carry more calories than Stevia but much less than even basic granulated sugar. Xylitol is especially excellent for the preservation of teeth and preventing tooth decay, whereas erythritol consumed by the body as a fiber. Apart from indigestion at large quantities, these alcohols have little to no negative side effects on the body. The most important thing is to purchase organic and non-refined brands of these sweeteners, as many of the popular marketed brands offer genetically modified products.
3. **Coconut Sugar:** Similar in appearance and taste to granulated brown sugar, this low glycemic sweetener is usually processed from the molasses of coconut blossoms. However, while the fructose levels are relatively low, the caloric intake does not differ much from regular sugar. However, unlike most sweeteners, it is coupled with plenty of nutrients and anti-oxidants. It's fantastic as a brown sugar substitute in baking, and tastes lovely in tea and coffee.
4. **Honey:** A medical miracle, at about 65 calories a tablespoon and an ingredient in many ancient herbal concoctions and drugs, raw honey is probably one of the safest and most natural sweeteners out there today. It is important however, to note the difference between processed and organic brands of honey, as well as the viscosity and texture of the honey. Raw, unpasteurized honey has a very solid and grainy texture to it, and the aftertaste of nectar is usually obvious. Unfortunately, baking and cooking with honey is a bit complicated, as it's a sticky substance and can alter the chemical process of other ingredients.
5. **Blackstrap Molasses:** As far as molasses goes, blackstrap is the best of them. Rich in minerals and nutrients, it's better than chemically processed sweeteners. It's also extremely high in iron, even more than that of red meat, making it an ideal supplement in your daily treats, marinades and toppings. However, as this molasses is the byproduct of over-boiled sugar cane, nutritionists do not recommend this for diabetics, as it does have a certain effect on the glycemic index of the body. A great blend for a perfect sweetener would be a mixture of coconut sugar and blackstrap molasses, mixed in a processor to be substituted as a ½ cup of sugar in any recipe.