

# Health Tips

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with

Dr. D


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## Reader Requested

### Health Tip: The Scoop on Artificial Sweeteners

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A recent Health Tip discussed the most commonly used natural sweeteners (honey, cane sugar, high fructose corn syrup, etc.). This led several readers to ask about artificial sweeteners. Are they safe? Is one better than another? Are there new ones on the horizon? Eating large amounts of sugar adds extra calories, which can cause weight gain. Because of this, many people have turned to artificial sweeteners as a way to enjoy their favorite foods without as many calories. This week we'll learn about the five FDA-approved artificial sweeteners--- sucralose, aspartame, saccharin, neotame, and acesulfame-K --- and their reported benefits.



**Sucralose** is the "800 lb. gorilla" of the artificial sweeteners, holding a 62% share of the \$1.5 billion artificial sweetener market. It is made by altering the chemical composition of common table sugar (sucrose), making it 600 times sweeter than sugar. Furthermore, since it is not appreciably absorbed into the body, it is considered to be calorie-free.

The brand name for sucraolose is Splenda (the yellow packet). It was approved by the FDA in 1998 and is considered to be a general-purpose sweetener for a variety of foods. Because of its incredible sweetness, dextrose or maltodextrin is mixed with sucralose to provide the volume in a Splenda packet.

**Aspartame**, a sweetener derived from two amino acids, aspartic acid and phenylalanine, is 200 times sweeter than sugar. It has the same number of calories per gram as sugar (4 kcal/g), but since the amounts used are very small, it is also considered to be calorie-free. In addition to its use as a

tabletop sweetener, it is also used to sweeten diet soft drinks, some sugar-free desserts, yogurt, and puddings. Brand names are Equal and NutraSweet (the blue packet). When ingested, aspartame is converted in the body to methanol and two amino acids--aspartic acid and phenylalanine. Because of the phenylalanine component, aspartame does carry a risk for people with the rare



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genetic disorder phenylketonuria.



**Saccharin** is the old veteran of the artificial sweeteners, having been discovered in 1879. Its chemical name is benzoic sulfonamide and despite being over 200 times sweeter than sugar, it has no calories. Brand names include Sweet'N Low (the pink packet), Sweet Twin, and Necta Sweet.

Saccharin is used in tabletop sweeteners, baked goods, soft drinks, jams, and chewing gum. Saccharin has had a checkered history, considered to be safe until 1972, when it was required to carry a warning label due to concerns that it could cause cancer. Following additional evaluation, the warning label was subsequently removed from its packaging. Perhaps the major advantage of saccharin is that it is less expensive than other artificial sweeteners.

**Neotame** is manufactured by the NutraSweet company and is chemically similar to their other sweetener, aspartame. Like aspartame, neotame is made from two amino acids, aspartic acid and phenylalanine. The potential release of phenylalanine from neotame, however, is so limited that a warning for those with phenylketonuria hasn't been required. Amazingly, it is 8,000 times sweeter than sugar! It was approved by the FDA as a general purpose sweetener, but is used primarily by the soft drink and food industry rather than as a table top sweetener.

**Acesulfame-K** is made from acetoacetic acid and the mineral potassium. It may show up on a food label as acesulfame K, acesulfame potassium, Ace-K, or Sunett. It is used most commonly in chewing gum, confections, cough drops and carbonated beverages. Acesulfame-K is 200 times sweeter than table sugar and is also used as a flavor-enhancer. The FDA considers acesulfame-K to be safe. Because of a slightly bitter taste when used on its own, it is often blended with other sweeteners.

**Benefits of the use of artificial sweeteners:** Low-calorie sweeteners have been promoted for the following purposes: weight maintenance, weight reduction, management of diabetes, reduction of dental caries, and reduction in the risks associated with obesity. With the epidemic of obesity in the U.S., there is clearly a need to reduce their caloric intake, and use of low-calorie sweeteners is one way to accomplish this. As with most things in life, however, you usually don't get something for nothing. In contrast to these benefits, a number of potential health concerns associated with these products have been identified. Next week we'll look at some of the concerns reported with the FDA-approved artificial sweeteners and see which, if any, stands out in terms of safety.

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