

Natural Sweeteners

Why do we crave sweets? Have you ever craved a sweet food when looking for sweetness in your life? The average American consumes well over 20 teaspoons of added sugar on a daily basis, which adds up to an average of 142 pounds of sugar per person per year! That's more than two times what the USDA recommends and is proof of sugar's addictive nature. Here you'll find information on natural sweeteners, all of which are gentler than the refined white stuff, easier on the body's blood sugar, and available in most health food stores. Even though these sweeteners are less processed than white sugar, it is still recommended that they be used in moderation.

Agave Nectar

Agave nectar, or agave syrup, is a natural liquid sweetener made from the juice of the agave cactus. It is 1.4 times sweeter than refined sugar, but does not create a sugar rush, and is much less disturbing to the body's blood sugar levels than white sugar. Due to its high fructose content and the fact that the glycemic index only measures glucose levels, agave syrup is noted for its lower glycemic index and glycemic load than many other natural. However, agave is high in fructose, higher than that of high-fructose corn syrup, and some research suggests that fructose does not shut off appetite hormones, and may decrease glucose tolerance, so you may end up overeating. Agave syrup naturally contains quantities of iron, calcium, potassium and magnesium. When baking with agave, reduce heat on oven by 25 degrees.

Barley Malt

Barley malt syrup is a thick, sticky, brown sweetener and is about half as sweet as refined white sugar. It is made from the soaking, sprouting, mashing, cooking and roasting of barley. In this process, the carbohydrates are broken down into simple sugars, yet the final product is more of a whole food than many other sweeteners and capitalizes on the naturally present enzymes. It contains approximately 65% maltose, 30% complex carbohydrate, 3% protein. Barley malt can also come in the form of powder.

Birch Sugar

Also referred to as xylitol, this natural sugar substitute can be made from tree fiber or corncobs, and occurs naturally in many fruits and mushrooms. Birch sugar is sweet, yet low on the glycemic index, and can be used by those with diabetes and hypoglycemia. It has 40% fewer calories than sugar, prevents tooth decay, and repairs tooth enamel. As with most sugar alcohols, consumption may result in bloating, diarrhea, and gas.

Birch Syrup

Birch syrup is also very low on the glycemic index and is rich in vitamins and minerals, including vitamin C, potassium, manganese, thiamine and calcium. This syrup is made from the concentrated sap of birch trees, and it takes 100 gallons of sap to make 1 gallon of syrup. Unlike maple syrup, which is composed of sucrose, this syrup is composed of fructose and is a gentler choice.

Brown Rice Syrup

This product consists of brown rice that has been ground and cooked, converting the starches to maltose. Brown rice syrup tastes like moderately sweet butterscotch and is quite delicious. In recipes, replace each cup of white sugar with ¾ cup brown rice syrup, and reduce the amount of other liquids. Brown rice syrup is made of 50% complex carbohydrates, 45% maltose, and 3% glucose. The small amount of glucose is absorbed into the bloodstream immediately, but the complex carbohydrates and maltose are much more slowly absorbed, providing a steady supply of energy. There is some glucose in rice syrup so diabetics should avoid using this sweetener.

Date Sugar

Date sugar consists of finely ground, dehydrated dates, utilizing this fruit's vitamin, mineral and fiber content. If you like the taste of dates, this will definitely appeal to you. Date sugar can be used as a direct replacement for sugar and comes in a granulated form; however, it can clump, and doesn't melt, making it an impractical substitution for certain baked goods and beverages

Erythritol

This sugar alcohol is a sweetener available in a powdered form. It is formed from the breaking down, fermenting, and filtering of sugar cane or corn starch. It has a cool taste that works well in coffee and tea. Erythritol doesn't affect your blood sugar or cause tooth decay. The cons of this sweetener are it may cause gas, bloating and diarrhea if consumed in excess.

Honey

One of the oldest natural sweeteners, honey is sweeter than sugar. Depending on the plant source, honey can have a range of flavors, from dark and strongly flavored, to light and mildly flavored. Raw honey contains small amounts of enzymes, minerals and vitamins. Some vegans choose not to eat honey, as it is a byproduct of bees.

Maple Syrup

Maple syrup is made from boiled-down maple tree sap and contains many minerals. 40 gallons of sap are needed to make one gallon of maple syrup. It adds a pleasant flavor to foods and is great for baking. Be sure to buy 100% pure maple syrup and not maple-flavored corn syrup. Grade B is stronger in flavor and said to have more minerals than Grade A.

Maple Sugar

Maple sugar is created when the sap of the sugar maple is boiled for longer than is needed to create maple syrup. Once most of the water has evaporated, all that is left is the solid sugar. Maple sugar is about twice as sweet as standard granulated sugar, but much less refined.

Molasses

Organic molasses is probably the most nutritious sweetener derived from sugar cane or sugar beet, and is made by a process of clarifying and blending the extracted juices. The longer the juice is boiled, the less sweet, more nutritious and darker the product is. Molasses imparts a very distinct flavor to food. Blackstrap molasses, the most nutritious variety, is a good source of iron, calcium, magnesium and potassium.

Rapadura

This brand-name product is made from a process of extracting juice from the sugarcane plant, evaporating the water from the juice, and then grinding the results into a fine powdery texture. Rapadura is organic, rich in vitamins and minerals, especially iron, and unrefined.

Stevia

This leafy herb has been used for centuries by native South Americans. The extract from stevia is 100 to 300 times sweeter than white sugar. It can be used in cooking, baking and beverages, does not affect blood sugar levels, and has zero calories. Stevia is available in a powder or liquid form, but be sure to get the green or brown liquids or powders, because the white and clear versions are highly refined.

Sucanat

Short for Sugar Cane Natural, this brand-name product consists of evaporated organic cane juice made through a mechanical rather than a chemical process, and thus less refined, retaining many of the sugarcane's original vitamins and minerals. It has a grainy texture and can be used in place of white sugar.

Turbinado

Turbinado sugar, also known as demerara, is crystallized sugar made from sugar cane extract. It is similar to brown sugar, although paler with larger crystals, and may be used interchangeably. It comes from the initial pressing of sugar cane, where white sugar is further refined. It is often sold in the United States as Sugar in the Raw. Though it is slightly less processed than white sugar, it still has the same negative health effects as white sugar.

Vegetable Glycerin

Vegetable glycerin is a colorless, odorless liquid with a very sweet taste and the consistency of thick syrup. It is derived from coconut and palm oils. As a sweetener, it is ideal for candida patients because it does not contain sucrose.

Using Natural Sweeteners

Natural sweeteners can be used to replace sugar in any recipe. Here is a guide to substituting these products for sugar. The amount indicated is equivalent to 1 cup of sugar, and the third column details what it is best to use for.

Sweetener	Amount = 1 cup Sugar	Use
honey	1/2-2/3 cup	all-purpose
maple syrup	1/2-3/4 cup	baking, desserts, sauces
maple sugar	1/2-1/3 cup	baking, candies
barley malt syrup	1-1 1/4 cups	bread and baking
brown rice syrup	1-1 1/3 cups	baking, cakes, sauces
date sugar	2/3 cup	bread, baking, candies
coconut sugar	1 cup	all-purpose
blackstrap molasses	1 to 1 1/3 cups	all-purpose
stevia	see manufacturer's label for quantity and usage, as they vary	

Selection

These can be found in natural food stores. Having a couple of different natural sweeteners in your kitchen will ensure that you have one for every need. Coconut sugar is wonderful in tea because it tastes great and dissolves easily. Brown rice syrup works well in your favorite cookie recipe. Use organic sweeteners when possible. Be a food detective and check labels of processed food to see what type of sweetener is being used. There are many cereals, snack foods, soymilks and sauces that use these natural sweeteners in place of sugar.

Benefits

Each sweetener has its benefits. Honey, maple syrup/sugar and date sugar contain nutrients that white sugar does not; at the same time they are still simple sugars that enter the bloodstream fairly quickly, causing a burst of energy then a drop off. We recommend using these occasionally. Barley malt, brown rice syrup and coconut sugar are slower to enter the bloodstream, so are more suitable for those with blood sugar issues. Stevia, also known as honey leaf, does not affect the bloodstream, and can be up to 300 times sweeter than sugar depending on the form (liquid or powder).