

Sweeteners

As we aim to eat less sugar, many of us are turning more and more to alternative sweeteners – and we may not even realize it!

The 'Intense sweeteners' (see below) are used in a wide range of manufactured sugar-free, reduced sugar and low calorie foods and are also available to use at home as tablet, liquid and granulated sweeteners. They add sweetness without adding extra calories. Intense sweeteners are a useful way to reduce energy intake from certain foods, which could help in weight control and are useful for people with diabetes.

As with all additives, sweeteners are thoroughly assessed for safety before they are permitted for use, and there are strict controls on the amount used and the type of food or drink they can be added to. Sweeteners are listed in the ingredients either by name or by their 'E' number.

There are 14 permitted sweetening substances in the UK; divided into two main groups:

- The polyols (Sorbitol (E420), mannitol (E421), isomalt (E953), maltitol (E965), lactitol (E966), and Xylitol (E967)). These are known as bulk or reduced calorie sweeteners because they are used in similar amounts to normal sugar but have fewer calories and are safer for teeth. If consumed in large amounts Polyols have a laxative effect.
- The intense (artificial) sweeteners (Acesulfame K (E950), aspartame (E951), aspartame-acesulfame salt (E962), cyclamates (E952), saccharin (E954), thaumatin (E957), neohesperidine DC (E959) and sucralose(E955)). These are many times sweeter than ordinary sugar and are used in tiny amounts. They are very low in calories and are safer for teeth.

At a time when obesity is at epidemic proportions sweeteners do have a role to play in providing sweet food that isn't so calorie laden. But are there draw backs – are some of the scare stories generated by the media to be believed?

The sweetener aspartame has certainly been demonised in sections of the press and several websites. There have been references to various cancers, hair loss, depression, dementia, behavioural disturbances, epilepsy... the list goes on.

In the circumstances, should we be using artificial sweeteners at all?

Numerous reviews of aspartame have been carried out by expert committees in the UK and EU on many occasions since its introduction in 1983. After studying all available scientific evidence, these committees have confirmed that it is safe for use. Some would argue though that people are consuming more than the recommended maximum level. This certainly isn't true in the UK – even among children and people with diabetes who consume large quantities of sugar-free drinks.

It should be remembered that aspartame is potentially life-threatening for people with the condition phenylketonuria, therefore any products containing aspartame have to carry the warning 'contains a source of phenylalanine'.