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Five popular alternatives to sugar and the health benefits

Sugar has become the new faux pas in the health industry. Everyone everywhere (or so it seems) is talking about how 'bad' sugar is for you. And it's not just white sugar they are banning from their kitchens. The evil synthetic sugar alternatives aspartame and acesulfame-K, to name just two, have been linked to cancer.

So what else is there? Here are my top 5 natural healthy alternatives to sugar in no particular order.

Coconut Nectar

This is a thick syrup made from coconut tree sap. Unlike maple syrup, it doesn't require intense heating to bring out its sweetness. This allows it to be enzymatically alive and for its naturally high amino acid profile to remain intact. It has far higher levels of important minerals than any other sugar, as well as high levels of Vitamin C.

Unlike sugar cane, which leeches the soil, coconut palms repair damaged soil, require very little water and produce 50-75 percent more sugar per acre than sugar cane.

Health Benefits: Low glycemic index; high in vitamins and minerals. Also has insoluble fibre, which prevents against sugar spikes in the bloodstream, and a unique medium chain fatty acid, said to help prevent heart disease.

Stevia

Stevia, a shrub native to Latin America, is not really a sugar at all! It is up to 300 times sweeter than sugar too. It has no kilojoules and does not raise blood sugar levels. Not all stevia is equal though. Often times, cellulose powder and bulking agents are added to make stevia more palatable. You must check the label first. The green powder is the stevia you need to be looking out for. Some people say Stevia has an aftertaste. This is something you can certainly get used to over time.

Health benefits: In truly unprocessed form, provides beneficial antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. Because our bodies can't digest the stevia plant, it offers essentially zero calories and has an extremely low glycemic index. Fructose count also becomes negligible, and it doesn't affect blood sugar levels.

Raw Honey

Source raw honey that's been organically and locally produced to reap the full benefits. Packed with vitamins, honey also has antimicrobial properties. It does have more calories than normal sugar but because it's sweeter you use less of it.

Health benefits: Natural antibacterial, antiviral and antifungal properties; can be used to treat ulcers. Some raw honeys have a number on their labels; the higher this number, the higher the antibiotic properties. Local, raw honey may also help people with seasonal allergies.

Dark Raw Unfiltered Agave

Agave nectar comes from the blue agave cactus – a massive plant. While it's become a popular sweetener among health enthusiasts in recent years and is a popular alternative to

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honey among vegans, you do need to ensure you are getting good quality raw dark unfiltered agave as oftentimes, the lighter agave is adulterated with HFCS. This is still a rare occurrence within Australia but does happen. Agave has a low GI of 30

Health benefits: Provides the body with several nutrients and may be beneficial for digestion. Because it's very sweet, a little goes a long way.

Yacon Syrup

Yacon syrup is made from the root of the yacon plant, which grows in the Andes region of South America. Thanks to its high fructooligosaccharides level (FOS), a sugar polymer our bodies cannot digest, it has minimal impact on blood sugar levels. It is glucose-free, and does not increase blood sugar levels. Because of this, yacon syrup is often recommended as a sweetener to those suffering from diabetes or at risk of becoming diabetic. Yacon syrup has a divine caramel flavour and is one of my favourites. I love its smooth taste, especially in chocolate!

Health Benefits: Considered a prebiotic as it aids in the absorption of calcium and other vitamins. Also promotes healthy gut flora, which is essential for good digestion. Because its primary sugar is FOS, which can't be absorbed, it's low-calorie and has a low glycemic index.

by Michelle Ovens, Naturopath

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