

## How Nonsugar Sweeteners Can Cause Weight Gain

*Artificial and natural sweeteners may not have calories, but they can do the opposite of making you slim.*



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By [Cara Michelle Miller](#)

1/26/2024 Updated: 1/26/2024



Have you removed sugar from your diet to lose weight, only to be met with cravings and weight gain instead? Artificial sweeteners may be to blame.

## Sweeteners Can Lead to Overeating

Nonsugar sweeteners are effective at stimulating the sweetness taste receptors on the tongue, which may increase sugar cravings that can lead to overeating, according to the [Endocrine Society](#).

“However, the amount that these cravings occur is dependent on each individual and their own brain chemistry, as well as their diet and metabolism as a whole,” Emily Harland, a registered dietitian specializing in clinical nutrition with Worley Nutrition Group, told The Epoch Times.

Hunger is different from [having a craving](#). A craving is an intense desire for a specific food or flavor that can feel uncontrollable. For many, it leads to eating processed foods higher in sugar or nonsugar sweeteners, salt, and unhealthy fats.

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A study in 2016 led by the University of Sydney revealed how sweetness without calories falsely tells the brain that it hasn't consumed enough energy. This signals the body to compensate by driving cravings that can lead to chronic eating and weight gain.

“When trying to be healthy and lose weight, it’s often really a balance of how much satiety or fullness or satisfaction you get,” said Benjamin White, registered dietitian and nutrition director at Structure House, a holistic residential weight-loss center. One challenge, he said, is that “non-nutritive sweeteners—the plant-based ones and the artificial ones—taste a lot sweeter than sugar, which makes it harder to feel satisfied with natural sugars in the forms of fruit and vegetables.”

Artificial substitutes and nonsugar sweeteners are often 100 to 700 times sweeter than regular sugar, with fewer or no calories. Because of their excess sweetness, according to Ms. Harland, “they tend to be used in lesser amounts.”

However, artificial sweeteners' excessive sweetness has been shown to alter the taste sensors on the tongue to prefer sweeter versions of already-sweet foods.

## **Taste Buds in the Gut Regulate How Much Food You Eat**

Over the past several years, researchers have found these taste sensors throughout the body, such as in the stomach, intestines, and other internal organs. Further research discovered how these taste receptors play a crucial role in coordinating digestion and regulating what kind of foods and how much one eats.

A surprising way this happens is via a glucose sensor in the gut wall that is identical to a sweetness receptor on the tongue. The gut sensor acts as a nutrient detector, or receptor, and also works as a calorie detection mechanism that helps control calorie intake for weight control. Low-calorie foods with little nutritional value signal these receptors to tell the appetite it hasn't been satisfied.

Besides packing on excess pounds, continuous overeating can increase a person's risk for insulin resistance.

While artificial sweeteners may not directly raise blood sugar, one study found that sucralose and saccharin caused blood sugar to rise like sugar by altering the healthy bacteria in the gut microbiome. A healthy microbiome is essential for maintaining a healthy weight and losing weight.

There are many other factors to consider when trying to reduce sweet cravings, including hormonal fluctuations or imbalances, like low serotonin levels, lack of sleep, nutritional deficiencies, and stress.

# As the Market for Sweets Grows, So Do Concerns

According to an [analysis by Mintel](#), a market research firm, the number of food products containing artificial sweeteners and sugar substitutes has surged in the past several years due to consumer demand. The market is expected to continue to grow.

Some substitutes are synthetic, like aspartame, sucralose, saccharin, neotame, and acesulfame potassium. Others, like allulose, stevia, and monk fruit extract, are often referred to as “naturally occurring” because they’re derived from plants.

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Concerns surrounding the adverse health effects of these sweeteners are due to mounting evidence that many of them can “alter sweet taste receptors, affect glucose intolerance, and disrupt the intestinal microbiota,” Rhandee Sauer, a nutritional therapy practitioner, told The Epoch Times. Each of these effects—on its own—is linked to unintentional weight gain.

The World Health Organization (WHO) advises against using nonsugar sweeteners, pointing to evidence that they do not help with long-term weight loss and come with other health risks. The recommendations to avoid nonsugar sweeteners apply to everyone except those with preexisting diabetes.

“Overall, sweeteners should be reduced in the diet,” Mr. White said. “Most Americans, nowadays, should eat more natural sugar in the form of fruits and vegetables, and some natural dairy, too.”

But many Americans find this difficult to achieve due to the prevalence and variety of nonsugar sweeteners.

“Nonsugar sweeteners are rampant in our packaged food supply today, so they are difficult to avoid completely,” said Ms. Harland.

## **Small Dietary Changes Make a Difference**

“Some people actually feel that a diet drink helps them to not indulge later. On the other hand, others report that when they have artificial sweeteners, they start craving more, they are hungrier, and they eat more later,” said Mr. White.

Since some evidence suggests that natural sugar, like that in fruits and vegetables, can help replace cravings for excessive sweeteners, eating a couple of pieces of fruit each day is an excellent place to start. It may be easier for others to add other naturally sweet foods to their diet, such as yogurt, sweet potatoes, or dried fruit, to satisfy cravings.

To reduce overall sweetness, Ms. Harland recommends checking the ingredients label to determine what type of sweetener is used and

looking at the “total added sugars” row on a nutrition label.

“The most evidence-based behavior change is to really go for the next manageable small thing that someone feels capable and ready to do,” Mr. White shared.

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If you haven’t already, gradually more add lean protein, whole grains, and healthy fats to your diet. If you need added sweetness, try a low-glycemic option, like date sugar or yakon syrup.

The goal is to reduce the need for sweet substitutes and sweetness overall, but gradual changes are key to avoiding the trap of “all or nothing,” according to Mr. White. He added: “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.”

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Cara Michelle Miller is a freelance writer and holistic health educator. She taught at the Pacific College of Health and Science in NYC for 12 years and led communication seminars for engineering students at The Cooper Union. She now writes articles with a focus on integrative care and holistic modalities.

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