

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Artificial Sweeteners: Are they Dangerous?”

Some medical scientists believe that we are becoming addicted to sugar. Even Gwyneth Paltrow got in on the act and vowed to completely quit sugar consumption, when she wrote, "...sugar works the addiction and reward pathways in the brain in much the same way as many illegal drugs. Sugar is basically a socially acceptable, legal, recreational drug with deadly consequences." The WHO recommends to consume no more than 10% of total daily [calories](#) from "free" sugars. Others found that even consuming [added sugars at recommended levels](#) reduced lifespan in mice. This brings up the artificial sweetener issue and its questionable safety. Many people turn to artificial sweeteners as a sugar alternative, but according to a 2014 study, these [sweeteners may drive diabetes and obesity](#). The study, published in the journal *Nature*, suggested artificial sweeteners - including saccharin, sucralose and aspartame - interfere with gut bacteria, increasing the activity of pathways associated with obesity and [diabetes](#). It appeared that this increase in artificial sweetener consumption coincides with the dramatic increase in the obesity and diabetes epidemics. Apparently, artificial sweeteners may have directly contributed to enhancing the exact epidemic that they themselves were intended to fight. Some high-profile studies have caused concern, suggesting that pregnant women who use high-intensity sweeteners incur risks, including premature delivery. Studies in mice have highlighted cancers related to ingestion of sweeteners in large quantities. However, the European Food Safety Authority launched a sweetener reevaluation program. The results for aspartame were obtained in 2013. The findings were clear: The report concluded that aspartame is safe if ingestion remains below 40 mg/kg per day. As an example, 40 mg/kg is the equivalent of drinking at least 12 cans of diet soda per day every day of the week. In 2015, the Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety (ANSES) in France evaluated the benefits and nutritional risks of high-intensity sweeteners and concluded: 1) There is no evidence to date that sweetener consumption causes eventual habituation to sweet tastes and an increased appetite for sugary products, 2) With regard to sweetener use for weight control, currently available data are contradictory, 3) Most studies show no effects of sweeteners on insulin or on blood glucose levels and in observational studies, sweeteners do not appear to increase the risk for diabetes, 4) Pregnancy data are insufficient to confirm a risk for premature birth or any health risk to the mother or child, and 5) ANSES concluded there is no evidence to link consumption of sweeteners and cancer risk.

In the America that I love, so-called "science" is becoming less credible, with opinions at considerable odds with each other. Always check to see who financed the study, as results vary accordingly.

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