

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“How Safe is Stevia ?”

The consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) has increased fivefold since the 1950s and is linked to cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, and diabetes. Artificial [sweeteners may drive diabetes and obesity](#). A **Nature** study suggested artificial sweeteners - including saccharin, sucralose and aspartame - interfere with gut bacteria, increasing the activity of pathways associated with obesity and [diabetes](#). Randomized controlled trials of artificially sweetened beverages have shown either no effect at all on weight loss, or only minor reductions. The main attraction of artificial sweeteners is that they can replace sugar. There is a huge amount of evidence suggesting high sugar consumption is bad for health. Sugary drinks can lead to weight gain, metabolic diseases, and, and type 2 diabetes. As for weight loss, a 2018 meta-analysis study, which combined the results of 56 different studies, concluded that in most cases groups of people using artificial sweeteners did not lose more weight than those using sugar. On the whole, switching from sugar to sweeteners has a neutral to positive effect on weight loss. It is likely that the impact of sweetener on weight loss depends on the original weight and diet of the individual. Stevia is a kind of sweetener processed from leaves. It is described as a low-calorie substitute for sugar, and, because of its “natural” designation, many people consider it as a safer and healthier option than artificial sweeteners available in the market today. But not many people know this natural sweetener may also come with its own potential issues. You may be one of the countless people who are using stevia for their food and drink because you believe it a proven safe substitute for sucralose and many other sweeteners. But a Ben-Gurion University of the Negev study showed that consumption of stevia might lead to gut health issues by upsetting the beneficial bacteria’s balance. Even though many people are reporting to have consumed stevia minus any evident changes in their health condition, a percentage of individuals have reported suffering unwanted side effects from consuming the sweetener. Among these side effects are heart palpitations and trouble with digesting food. Some individuals who complain of experiencing stomach pain, gas, and constipation, among others, while they’re using stevia. Even though stevia was not found to destroy the gut microbes, the research study did note that it may delay the communication between various bacteria in an individual’s gut microbiome. There's concern that raw stevia herb may harm your kidneys, reproductive system, and cardiovascular system. It may also drop blood pressure too low or interact with medications that lower blood sugar.

In the America that I love, a diet drink might be better than a sugary one, but water is likely even better.

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