



THE PLAIN DEALER

Evidence supports safety of noncaloric sweeteners

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Q: You suggest switching to sugar-free soda to help lose weight. I have heard that artificial sweeteners overexcite brain cells and damage them. . . . Most people would agree that being overweight is preferable to losing the use of your mind.

- KB

A: Anyone who cruises the Internet is aware that use of noncaloric sweeteners (particularly aspartame) has been blamed for endless health problems including systemic lupus, multiple sclerosis, vision problems, headaches, fibromyalgia, fatigue, manic depression, panic attacks, seizures, Alzheimer's disease and Persian Gulf Syndrome.

It is reasonable to ask whether noncaloric sweeteners are safe. An even better question is whether artificial sweeteners are actually helpful in weight management.

There is no evidence that people who use artificial sweeteners are thinner than those who don't, although some studies indicate artificial sweeteners might help successful dieters keep weight off. Last June, results of a rat study at Purdue made headlines with the suggestion that artificial sweeteners might interfere with the body's ability to count calories. (Less well-publicized was a second study by the same group that showed rats do not perceive the calories in liquids as they do in solid foods, supporting the notion that high-calorie beverages contribute "add-on" calories.)

If the role of noncaloric sweeteners in weight management is murky, the safety issue is less so (see accompanying list).

The artificial sweeteners approved by the Food and Drug Administration have undergone hundreds of pre- and post-market safety tests. Despite the online uproar, there is no evidence these products pose undue risk, and they might be helpful to some dieters. That said, because they have not been in the food supply for centuries, it is prudent to follow the principles of variety and moderation.

In other words, don't overdo it.

Why do I suggest eliminating sugar-containing soda if weight is an issue? People who use foods and beverages high in added sugars tend to consume more calories than those who don't. There is an association between the consumption of calorically sweetened beverages and weight gain. Regular soda contributes 33 percent of the added sugar in the American diet.

This is why the just-published "Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005" explicitly

recommends decreasing the intake of foods with added sugars, especially beverages with caloric sweeteners.

Do note: Artificially sweetened soda is not the only substitute for the high-calorie kind. Water is a great alternative. My personal favorite is unsweetened iced tea, packed with health-enhancing phytochemicals. But one of the principles of behavior change is to start where the client is. I've had weight-management clients who were drinking 4 liters of regular soda (1,600 calories) a day. If a client is unwilling to give up regular soda for water, she might be willing to change to diet pop. Given the very clear evidence linking obesity to chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer, I'd say that's a wise move.

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of the University of Akron. Her column runs every other week. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com.

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