

Sugar substitutes for diabetics: Five sugars that are OK to eat

(NaturalNews) Over the past 25 years, the prevalence of diabetes has risen substantially in the U.S. (1) Today, nearly 26 million Americans have diabetes, including 7 million people who have not been diagnosed. Almost 2 million men and women are diagnosed with diabetes each year -- that's more than 5,200 each day. What's more, diabetes plays a primary or contributing role in nearly a quarter-million deaths annually in the U.S. (2)



For those struggling with diabetes, learning to control cravings for specific foods is central to managing the disease. Most experts advise avoiding eating sweet and sugary foods to help ensure that blood glucose and insulin levels remain as stable as possible, but cutting out sugar entirely isn't realistic for most people. Luckily, there are several natural sugar substitutes that make satisfying your sweet tooth a tasty possibility -- and many have health benefits in addition to their sweet taste. Here are five alternatives you should consider if you're looking for a substitute for refined sugars:

Raw honey

A gift from the bees and flowers, honey is available in 300 distinct varieties in the U.S., all of which have unique flavors based on the nectar source. Raw honey -- especially the darker varieties like buckwheat -- contains antioxidants that can help fight cell-damaging free radicals, as well as strong antibacterial properties. Because it can be easily used by the body, some studies have reported that consuming honey can improve athletic performance compared to other carb sources.

Coconut sugar

Made from the sap of the coconut palm, coconut sugar has gained a lot of attention in recent years, thanks to results of initial studies which show that it may have a lower glycemic index than refined sugars, preventing the spikes in blood sugar levels that can interfere with diabetes management and play a major role in weight management. To obtain the sugar, the sap is boiled down to a thick syrup, dried and then ground into a powder that has a flavor similar to caramel. The sugar that results retains many of the healthful properties of coconut, including nutrients like iron, zinc, calcium and potassium.

Date sugar

While coconut sugar comes from sap, date sugar comes from the fruit itself. In fact, it is the fruit -- dried and then finely ground. That means it has the same amount of fiber as the whole fruit, as well as nutrients like vitamin B6, iron and magnesium. Since it's finely powdered fruit, it doesn't dissolve well in liquids like coffee or tea, but it is great added to other foods and can even be substituted at a 1:1 ratio in recipes that call for brown sugar.

Molasses

Molasses is actually a byproduct of the white-sugar-refining process, containing all the nutrients and vitamins that are stripped away as sugar cane is refined. Including high levels of iron, calcium, potassium, manganese, magnesium and selenium as well as plenty of B vitamins, molasses is quite possibly the most nutrient-rich natural sweetener around. (3) For years, molasses was relegated primarily to use as a livestock feed, but today, more attention is being paid to its use in "people food." There are several grades available, but blackstrap molasses contains the most nutritional benefits.

Maple syrup

Made from the sap of maple trees -- mostly sugar maples -- the sap is boiled down to create a thick, amber liquid that's not just sweet -- it's also full of calcium, potassium, manganese, phosphorous, magnesium and iron, as well as vitamins B2, B5, B6, niacin, biotin and folic acid. (4) Maple syrup is about 70% sugar and contains about 50 calories per tablespoon -- less than corn syrup, which has 60 calories per tablespoon. To maximize your intake of vitamins and nutrients, opt for the darker, grade B syrup rather than the lighter grade A typically used over pancakes. You can also buy maple sugar, formed when the liquid in maple syrup evaporates.

Whether you have diabetes or you're at risk for developing the disease, or if you simply want to choose healthier alternatives to refined sugars, these natural sweeteners can provide healthier -- and tastier -- alternatives to white and brown sugars and artificial sweeteners. Try incorporating one or two into your diet and enjoy the benefits of a more natural sugar substitute. And if you've been experiencing any of the symptoms of diabetes or prediabetes, including extreme thirst, heightened appetite, major weight loss or weight gain or frequent urination, see your doctor to discuss your risk profile and talk about the tests that can help determine if you have the disease.