

YUMMY NORTHWEST

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A sweet beginning

Welcome to the new year! No doubt you've made a few resolutions, at least momentarily. After you've thoroughly enjoyed the holidays, perhaps January seems like a good time to think about healthy living again.

Yummy Northwest is all about eating with joy. But sometimes that means being careful of what you eat. Too much sugar can cloud the mind and make that joy seem somewhat dim and not really enjoyable at all. So this month, **Yummy** considers the sugar-free life.

But what is "sugar free"? An excellent question that, alas, cannot be entirely answered in this small space. There should be enough information, however, to get you thinking about what it means to you. Here's to a happy, healthy new year!

What is sweet, what is not

White sugar, the top food additive in the U.S., always seems to head the list of no-no's in a healthy diet. Being ultra-refined, it sends blood sugar levels rising quickly and then plummeting, causing unpleasant sensations in your body, whether you are aware of them or not.

Our bodies naturally crave sweet things, probably meant to send us searching for fruit and tasty vegetables and grains. But nowadays there are many sweeteners available, and it is not always easy to figure out what is good for us and what just makes things taste good.

First decide why you want to give up sugar. If you want sweeteners that have some nutrients, honey, molasses, maple syrup, and dehydrated sugarcane juice might be OK. If you want to avoid a "sugar rush," fructose or date sugar could help. If you are giving up "all" sugar, perhaps stevia is the answer.

You can easily do your own research to find out specific information about these and other sweeteners, but keep in mind that every Web site and article has its own agenda. Also, if you are cooking or baking with sweeteners new to you, be prepared for some surprises. Plain white



Sweet facts

There is endless information about sugar and various sweeteners in books, in magazines, and on the Internet.

A good local source for all-things sweet (both natural and refined) is the Web site of PCC Natural markets. Search for "sweeteners" and you'll find articles with details about types of sugars and the pros and cons of using them.

www.pccnaturalmarkets.com

Stevia is an interesting sweetener that has not yet been approved by the FDA as a food additive, although you can buy it as a dietary supplement. Used around the world for centuries, stevia seems to not only sweeten things but also be good for you. The Pacific Northwest provides excellent growing conditions for the plant, so you can experiment with using stevia leaves – perhaps in tea. (Note that the stevia plant might not survive winter here.) Find information about stevia and buy seeds at www.mulberrycreek.com.

sugar cannot be replaced willy nilly in baked goods without some change in texture, looks, and taste.

Artificial sweeteners come and go, and although some may be safe to eat, why not avoid them in favor of natural sweeteners that have been around for many generations?

One thing to watch for no matter which sweetener you choose, is making sure you eat some fiber and fat with your choice. These help slow down the process that makes insulin levels rise. Dr. Barry Sears, in his Zone diet books, advises eating some protein with any carbohydrate to ensure the steady flow of insulin.

But why should you believe all this theoretical research? Let some gals who really gave up sugar tell you themselves how they did it and what works for them.

Reprogramming a way of thinking

Here are the things I can think of to say about my sugar-free life, after almost a half-year of living it:

-- To get off sugar I had to reprogram my way of thinking. At age 66, I'd had a lifetime of loving cookies, pies, and cake with lots of icing. I remind myself often that sugar is a poison in our bodies, that it provides nothing but empty calories, and that real food – and therefore real *physical* satisfaction – consists of eating fresh fruit, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, with occasional eggs and cheese.

-- When I find I want a bit of sweet something to eat, I use stevia, either in liquid drops or finely powdered form, on cooked grains. With a bit of vanilla, I also add stevia to a glass of plain rice milk, or to a rice milk, yogurt, and fruit smoothie. Both forms of this sweetener are derived from a plant of the same name, are available at many whole foods sections in supermarkets, and always at whole-foods markets. It tastes great on my morning oatmeal mixed in with rice milk or yogurt, or both, and with a dash of cinnamon. Stevia adds no extra calories, it really does sweeten, and it's not artificial, like chemically formulated sweeteners.

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It doesn't have an aftertaste and doesn't, as far as I can tell from reading about it, tear up your liver, as some of the chemical substitutes can with heavy use.

-- I don't think about needing things to be sweet anymore, and actually now prefer them not to be. I like fresh fruit and plain yogurt on waffles, rather than syrups or honey. I've even started making waffles into a savory base for roasted or steamed veggies to which I add a generous spoonful or two of vegetarian gravy to help everything go down smoothly and to make it a true main dish.

-- I've lost 12 lbs. at a nice, slow pace (6 months), which has stayed off – just by eliminating sugar. I have more energy. It's funny about food: it's what your body is begging for – real food, with proteins, carbs, and yes, even fats. I found when I started to eat real food in moderate servings, at regular times during the day, that a lot of compulsive eating of sugary foods just evaporated away. There were ups and downs emotionally the first three or four weeks, as I changed my thinking and eating habits, but these have leveled off. Change of all kinds takes motivation, discipline, a bit of game-playing, and a good dollop of stubbornness – and it pays off handsomely when it comes to getting sugar out of one's diet.

-- I still have urges to get baked goods when I'm in town, but I've resisted. Why did there have to be two new coffee-and-good-pastry places open just NOW, when we've gone years and years without any place like that?

-- My son told me that his family has switched to agave syrup for almost all their sugar use. Supposedly, even diabetics can tolerate this form of sweetener, and it can be used in baking.
C., Astoria, Ore.

No more cravings

Three years ago, I joined a "fitness boot camp" in an effort to jump start my regular workouts, which had lacked consistency. I also met weekly with a nutritionist; what I learned about food floored me.

For the first two weeks, my meals consisted of protein shakes and chicken. I was more or less weaned off sugar, which I never realized I had consumed so much of. During the first week, my hands and feet were freezing (I'm normally a human heater), and I experienced severe headaches. My body went into shock from lack of sugar that I consistently pumped into it. Once I got used to not having sugar, I no longer craved that afternoon sweet snack and, instead, gravitated toward healthier munchies, such as baby carrots, yogurt, and fruit. I also started eating more proteins, such as beef jerky, which satisfied my cravings and kept me full for longer periods of time. In my sugary days, eating a

Nutty No-Sugar Brownies

These are chewy, easy-to-make chocolate treats. And, believe it or not, they will not give you a sugar buzz.

1/2 cup plus 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 1/2 cups well-packed date sugar
1/2 cup minus 1 1/2 teaspoons water
6 egg whites or 3 extra-large eggs
3/4 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup well-packed unsweetened cocoa powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup chopped nuts
3/4 teaspoon baking soda

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease the bottom of a 9-by-9-by-2-inch baking pan.

In a large bowl, stir together all ingredients except baking soda until well combined. Stir in baking soda quickly, and then mix (28 to 30 beats); immediately pour mixture into prepared baking pan.

Bake 20 minutes at 350 degrees. Turn down oven to 325 degrees and bake another 15 minutes or until a cake tester inserted into center of brownies comes out clean.

Remove pan from oven and place on a wire rack. Cool 30 minutes before cutting brownies. To store, place cooled brownies in airtight container and store on countertop or freeze.

Makes 9 servings.

from "The 'I Can't Believe This Has No Sugar' Cookbook"
by Deborah E. Buhr

lovely piece of chocolate only made me want more – the downfall of what sugar does to a body.

After my 22-week program, I had lost 35 pounds and had the best eating habits of my life. Fast forward to now, and I can't say I'm still as hardcore as I was three years ago, but definitely more aware of what I put in my body and, particularly, how addictive sugar is. I've gained some, not all, of the weight back, but am still working out consistently. Once the holidays are over, I'm going to go back off sugar and start the cycle again!

J., Seattle

Can't have just one

My name is Sandy, and I am a sugarholic. I love chocolate, cookies, cakes, and Snickers. I gave up sugar several years ago. There have been times where I have fallen "off the wagon" or was mistaken that I could have one candy, one cookie, and still be OK. I was wrong.

What always proves to be correct is that sugar affects my mental state as well as my physical state. When I have cleared my system of sugars (that takes at least two weeks), I no longer have aches in my joints and muscles, I think clearly and function more calmly. There is just an overwhelming sense of well being.

The sugar-free life is a good life. Finding foods that contain no refined sugars, or sugar substitutes, allows you to really think about what you are eating. Pineapple, fresh and dried (Trader Joe's has wonderful dried pineapple with no sugar or sulfites), grapes, and Pink Lady or Fuji apples have become my favorite snacks.

Searching for pastries that are sweetened with maple syrup or molasses is not easy. I have found that the Flying Apron Bakery has delightful treats that are not only sugar free but also wheat free. PCC also has wonderful cookies, muffins, and nut bars that are sugar free.

A sugar-free life seems to lead you to examine all refined foods and their effect on your health. It is truly amazing how once you feel healthy other changes come so easily.

S., Seattle

About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest.

Contact the editor

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