



Behind the hype:

Sweeteners

Why is this an issue?

Healthy eating guidelines recommend limiting the amount of sugar added to foods and beverages because it contributes to excess energy intake and dental decay. Foods sweetened with artificial or intense sweeteners are lower in sugar and energy, so provide a choice for people to reduce their sugar and energy (kilojoule) consumption. While the safety of some sweeteners has been debated over the years, current evidence shows artificial or intense sweeteners are safe for most people.

What are artificial or intense sweeteners?

They are ingredients that are considerably sweeter than sugar, and are added to food in small amounts to replace sugar. This reduces the energy content of the food.

The range of permitted sweeteners has recently been broadened to include steviol glycosides, a plant-based sweetener from stevia leaves.

Where are they commonly found?

Foods sold as diet, sugar-free or low-joule commonly contain an intense sweetener.

These include soft drinks, confectionery, jams, dairy products and canned fruit. Some intense sweeteners are sold as sugar substitutes for baking as well as for tea and coffee.

In a nutshell

- Intense sweeteners are used to replace sugar in foods, providing sweetness with little or no energy.
- Use of intense sweeteners in food in New Zealand is controlled by the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ).
- Latest evidence shows intense sweeteners are safe for most people.
- Children and young people should limit consumption of intensely sweetened drinks (especially between meals) to prevent damage to teeth caused by the acid in some of these drinks. Pregnant women should check food labels for any restriction of use prior to consumption.
- To reduce the sugar content of your diet and for overall good health:
 - choose foods and drinks that are minimally processed
 - check nutrition labels on food packaging for sugar content and switch to lower sugar products – as a guide, 4g sugar equals 1 teaspoon of sugar
 - gradually reduce the amount to sugar added to foods and beverages to allow time for taste buds to adjust.
 - drink water or reduced or low-fat milk instead of sugar-sweetened beverages.

Why are they used?

The main benefit of adding intense sweeteners to food instead of sugar is to reduce sugar and energy content. This can be helpful for people trying to reduce their sugar and energy intakes.

Here is a comparison of the energy and sugar content of canned peaches using different sweeteners.

Canned peaches (100g)	Energy (kilojoules)	Sugar (grams)	Teaspoons of sugar
in syrup	289	16	4
in juice	175	9	2
light (intense sweetener)	85	4	1

It is important to note that some diet drinks, while low in sugar or sugar-free, are acidic and can damage teeth. It is recommended these drinks are only consumed occasionally and included as part of a meal rather than consumed between meals.

Who controls their use in food?

Intense sweeteners are classified as food additives under the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, which are the regulations governing the safety of food sold in New Zealand. These regulations limit the amounts and types of sweeteners permitted in foods and the foods manufacturers can add sweeteners to.

Are they safe?

All food ingredients, including intense sweeteners, undergo a risk assessment before being approved for use by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). In addition, intakes in the population are routinely monitored. Recent research shows the amount consumed is below the acceptable levels set internationally.

References

<http://www.foodsmart.govt.nz/whats-in-our-food/chemicals-nutrients-additives-toxins/food-additives/sweeteners/>

<http://www.foodstandards.govt.nz/consumer/additives/intensesweetener/Pages/default.aspx>

Ministry of Health (2012). Food & Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy Children and Young People (aged 2-18years). Ministry of Health: Wellington.

