



THE SWEETEST THING

JO CARUANA EXPLORES THE BENEFITS OF STEVIA, A NATURAL SWEETENER THAT'S TAKEN THE WORLD BY STORM.

Sugar has been a bad guy for a while now. There are records as far back as 1633 charting the many reasons people should avoid sugar. An article from that time professed that sugar rotted the teeth, damaged the blood and even caused bad breath.

And it doesn't stop there. Sugar is linked to all sorts of nastiness: obesity, heart disease, kidney disease, high and low blood sugar, headaches and toothaches, hyperactivity and fatigue, nearsightedness and farsightedness, dyspepsia and gout.

Hence the search for a suitable alternative – and there have been many. Acesulfame Potassium is found in soft drinks, gelatins, chewing gum and frozen desserts but may be linked to cancer. Aspartame is one of the world's most widely used sweeteners but has also been accused of causing cancers and – ironically – obesity. Saccharine has also had lots of bad press while even honey can't be consumed in large amounts.

Several of the artificial sweeteners have been on the market a long time, and have made their way into our food because, frankly, there was never a low (or 'no') calorie alternative that still gave consumers that

sweet fix. But, in 2011 all that changed when Stevia (which is also known as Truvia) was approved for use in the EU.

“Stevia doesn't come with the nasty side effects of some of its synthetic counterparts”

Extracted from the leaves of the Stevia Rebaudiana Bertoni plant, Stevia is completely natural, up to 300 times sweeter than sugar, and completely calorie-free. As a result, it has since made its way into all sorts of products, including beverages made by the largest drinks-producing companies in the world. And it has certainly made its mark.

“Stevia is an excellent alternative to sugar and other artificial sweeteners,” says registered dietitian-nutritionist Dr Mario Caruana. “Both the World Health Organisation's Joint Experts Committee on Food Additives and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) have approved it based on long-term studies, and determined that an acceptable daily intake of the main ingredient in Stevia is up to 4mg per kilogram of body weight.

“This means that a 70kg person can safely consume around 820 mg of stevia leaf extract every day over his or her lifetime, without any adverse health effect,” he explains. “This amount is equivalent to around 8 teaspoons of Stevia per day, which is the equivalent of 32 teaspoons of sugar. That's usually more than you are likely to consume, so it is very viable.” »

That said, Dr Mario stresses that it is important to bear these figures in mind because, if taken in excess, Stevia may cause low blood pressure, which would be of concern to some taking blood pressure medications and may interact with common medications such as cholesterol-lowering and anti-inflammatory drugs."

He continues to explain that, in addition to providing a calorie-free option, compared with sugar, non-nutritive sweeteners such as Stevia, generally do not increase blood sugar levels, making them a good option for people with diabetes. "Also, since non-

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nutritive sweeteners do not contain carbohydrates, they do not promote tooth decay and are deemed safe in pregnancy," he says.

"Non-nutritive sweeteners may assist in weight management, especially if there is a significant consumption of nutritive sweeteners such as sugar in the diet. As another strategy, if adding non-nutritive sweeteners to nutrient-dense food choices such as fruit will help improve palatability for some, it has the potential to boost overall diet quality by increasing fruit intake."

One person who has certainly become a fast fan of Stevia is mum and self-confessed baking-addict Becca Janssens. She first discovered the sweetener when a friend added it to her mint tea.

"I was really surprised as I knew she wasn't a fan of sweeteners so I asked her what it was," she recalls. "It was the first I'd ever heard of it so, when I got home, I decided to do some research and the rest is history."

Becca admits to having a strong sweet

STEVIA: The Facts

- Stevia comes from the stevia plant, which is naturally grown in Brazil and Paraguay. It has been used to sweeten foods for centuries but has only become widely recognised in recent years.

- Stevia is calorie free and up to 300 times sweeter than granulated table sugar, so you really only need to use a tiny bit of it.

- You can use Stevia when you bake, and this will certainly make your recipe healthier. That said, you will only need to use a tiny bit of it, and will likely need to use a bulking

ingredient instead to make up for the lost volume. Stevia won't brown, so you'll still need to top your dish with sugar if you want it to caramelise.

- Stevia is available in several forms, namely, extract powder, dried leaves, liquid extract or small pellets.

- Stevia is known to be a good alternative for diabetics as it has a glycemic index of zero.

tooth.
"If there's a

packet of

cookies, some sweets,

or a piece of cake nearby, I can

never have 'just one'," she says. "When I got pregnant I obviously had to keep an eye on my sugar intake and, equally, I didn't want my daughter to grow up wired on candy and artificial foods. So, I

decided to start trying to live a healthier lifestyle

and cut out sugar and artificial additives where possible. Stevia has helped me to achieve this without sacrificing my guilty pleasures."

Becca has since come up with creative ways to use Stevia instead of sugar. "I try to replace sugar with Stevia in cakes, puddings and sweet sauces," she says.

"Sadly it isn't always possible because some dishes require sugar for the overall structure but, nine-times-out-of-10, it works really well and has proved to be a great alternative.

"I really like it because, unlike Aspartame and so many of the artificial sweeteners out there, Stevia doesn't come with the nasty side effects of some of its synthetic counterparts.

"I have actually found that it goes really well with fresh fruit, mint and chocolate.

Because it has its own particular flavour, mixing Stevia with more potent items masks that unfamiliar taste. On the flip side, I really don't like it with coffee.

"Either way, it is a case of trial and error, but it's definitely worth investigating so that you can discover when you do like using it, as that will quickly mean less sugar and, thus, fewer calories. I am definitely a convert. I have even started growing Stevia plants in my garden." ><