



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.” >>