



Is there a safe sugar substitute for children?

Over the last two decades, there has been increased attention on the impact of added sugars on children's health. Sugar substitutes, also known as artificial or non-nutritive sweeteners, were created to help sweeten foods and drinks for people who could not have a lot of sugar, such as children and adults who have diabetes. Now, more than one in four children eat or drink something with sugar substitutes each day. Common food sources include lower-sugar or no-sugar-added options of favorites like jelly, yogurt, pudding, ice cream, fruit cups, fruit drinks, and soda.

Sugar substitutes can be 200 to 20,000 times sweeter than sugar! A little substitute goes a long way to sweeten foods, but are they safe for children to regularly eat or drink? Studies have shown that sugar substitutes are linked with changes in children's taste preferences and appetite. Children can occasionally eat and drink products that have sugar substitutes. But it is important to help children eat a balanced diet to provide the energy and nutrients they need to grow, play, and learn.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved six sweeteners: saccharin, aspartame, acesulfame, potassium, sucralose, neotame, and advantame. The FDA recommends limiting intake to 5 milligrams of sugar substitute per kilogram (kg) of body weight. For example, if a child weighs 110 pounds (50kg), their limit would be 250 milligrams of sugar substitutes each day. A 12 ounce can of diet soda has around 200 milligrams. This shows how quickly small amounts of sweetener add up.

You can support healthy growth and development by limiting foods and drinks that have sugar substitutes. Often, foods or drinks with sugar substitutes replace similar snack or "junk" foods that are low in nutrients and high in energy. Review the ingredients list of food labels to find out if foods or drinks have sugar substitutes. Instead, try one of the whole food snack options below.

Serve water or plain dairy or plant-based milk in place of sugar-free or sugary drinks.

- Frozen fruit popsicles
- Popcorn
- Celery with peanut butter
- String cheese and fruit of your choice
- Pickles
- Peanut butter and whole-grain crackers

More research is needed about the impact of sugar substitutes in humans, especially children. If you want more information about this topic, or have any questions about health conditions, reach out to a pediatrician or a registered dietitian for guidance through change.

Reference

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