



Treat agave nectar as an added sugar

Is agave nectar just like honey or sugar? I've heard it's a lot healthier, but I'm not sure what to make of those claims.

Let's start with the bottom line: Agave nectar is an added sugar, like honey, sugar, maple syrup, high fructose corn syrup, and other sugars that are added to foods and beverages during processing and preparation.

Agave nectar, also called agave syrup, is often marketed as a healthier alternative to the other sweets. But you're right to be skeptical. The claims are based on the glycemic index of agave nectar, which is lower than other sugars. The lower the glycemic index of a food, the lower your blood sugar will spike when you consume it. That's an important consideration, especially for people with diabetes.

However, how blood sugar reacts to the food you eat is much more complex than it might appear if you just examine the glycemic index of individual foods or ingredients of foods.

The idea behind the glycemic index is this: Foods that quickly raise blood sugar to high levels ("high-glycemic" foods) also provoke the release of high levels of insulin, because insulin is needed to get sugar from the bloodstream and into cells where it can be used for energy. Chronically high levels of insulin release are associated with insulin insensitivity, which in turn is associated with Type 2 diabetes. So, it makes sense, especially if you're at

risk for diabetes, to focus when you can on low-GI foods, right?

Well, yes and no. First, it would be difficult to restrict your diet solely to low-glycemic foods. In addition, blood sugar levels and insulin react to other factors, too. In fact, some studies suggest that large amounts of fructose, for example, can increase insulin resistance, which increases the risk of diabetes. And guess what? Agave nectar is 90 percent fructose, much higher than the 50 percent fructose in table sugar and even higher than the amount in high-fructose corn syrup.

One benefit of being high in fructose is that agave nectar is sweeter, measure for measure, than other sugars. So, you may find yourself using less of it than sugar or honey. But it's still just an added sugar, adding calories to your diet with little nutritional value.

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans say consumers should limit their intake of added sugar and solid fats, combined, to 5 percent to 15 percent of total calories a day. If you're following a 2,000 calorie-a-day diet, that's 300 calories a day, tops.

The best advice? Take a close look at your intake of any added sugar, and, if you're like most people, find ways to reduce it. Your body will thank you for it.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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