



Pros and cons of sugar alcohols

At a diabetes education class, I learned that “sugar-free” candies sometimes have more carbohydrates than their regularly sweetened counterparts. Why would anyone do that?

Most likely, those foods contain sweeteners called “sugar alcohols,” including sorbitol, mannitol, maltitol, xylitol, isomalt and erythritol, for example. These sweeteners aren’t sugar or alcohol, but their chemical structure is somewhere in between, hence the name.

Sugar alcohols have half the calories of regular sugar — 2 calories per gram, compared with 4 calories per gram for sugar and other carbohydrates. Because of that, they’re often used in products to reduce calories but stay sweet. You might find them in a broad range of products, including chocolate, candy, chewing gum, ice cream and other frozen desserts, cookies and other baked goods, fruit spreads, and even toothpaste and mouthwash.

But this adds a complication for people with diabetes or anyone else who counts carbohydrates as part of their intake. Grams of sugar alcohols are listed on Nutrition Facts labels, but they don’t need to be counted as much as regular carbohydrates. The American Diabetes Association recommends doing some math: For any food containing more than 5 grams of sugar alcohols, take half of

those grams and subtract them from the total grams of carbohydrates listed on the label. So, if a food has 6 grams of sugar alcohol and a total carbohydrate count of 15, then subtract 3 (half of 6 grams) from 15, and count that food as having 12 grams of carbohydrates.

When you do the math, you might find that foods with sugar alcohols may not really have more carbohydrate grams than comparable foods made with regular sugar, corn syrup or other caloric sweetener. But sometimes the adjusted carbohydrate count might be higher — it just depends on the food. Perhaps replacing sugar with sugar alcohol requires the addition of other carbohydrates to make the formulation work. This shows how important it is to always look at the Nutrition Facts label.

Sugar alcohols have less of an effect on blood sugar than other carbohydrates partly because they are not completely absorbed into the bloodstream. While that’s an advantage for blood sugar levels, it also can cause digestive problems: Many people report bloating, gas or even diarrhea when they consume too much sugar alcohol.

How much is too much? Everyone is different. If you’re not accustomed to eating foods with sugar alcohol, be aware of the potential disadvantages.

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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