

# Are sugar alternatives healthy?

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A review of research on artificial and natural sweeteners commonly used as alternatives to sugar failed to find strong evidence they provide significant health benefits, but also found no harm from using them.

The analysis, published in *The BMJ*, was commissioned by the World Health Organization with the aim of developing guidelines on the use of non-sugar sweeteners such as aspartame and stevia.

"Unfortunately, we don't have sufficient data to assess fully the potential benefits and harms of non-sugar sweeteners," said senior researcher Joerg Meerpohl, director of the Institute for Evidence in Medicine at the University of Freiburg in Germany.

Meerpohl and colleagues gathered research that explored the impact of artificial sweeteners on important health outcomes like weight and blood sugar levels. They eventually settled on 56 studies, 35 of which were not clinical trials.

Some of the small studies suggested non-sugar sweeteners might slightly improve body mass index (BMI, a measure of weight relative to height) and blood sugar. And a study of overweight and obese individuals who were not trying to lose weight found that the artificial sweeteners were associated with a loss of nearly 4.5 lbs.

But artificial sweeteners did not seem to help overweight and obese adults and children who actually were trying to lose weight.

What's important when you're trying to lose weight, Michele Pfarr said, "is a focus on overall calorie intake and eating nutrient-rich foods like fruits and vegetables, along with low-fat dairy, whole grains and lean meat."

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