



Stevia

Stock #1386-7 (1.26 oz.)
Stock #1381-6 (50 packets)

With an ever-growing concern over the safety and use of artificial sweeteners, it's good to know there is a natural alternative. *Stevia rebaudiana* is a small South American shrub known for its incredible sweetness. In fact, native cultures have used stevia as a natural sweetener for their plant-based beverages and medicines since at least the 16th century. Today, stevia is grown world-wide for its amazing sweetening properties and is most widely recognized and used as a non-sugar sweetener in food and drinks. In fact, stevia accounts for nearly 40% of the sweetener market in Japan and is commonly used in various parts of South America.¹⁻⁵

Various glycosides in stevia leaves contribute to its sweetening properties; however, stevioside is the principle substance credited for stevia's sweetness. In its natural form (sold as a green powder), stevia is approximately 10 to 15 sweeter than common table sugar (the simple sugar processed from sugarcane and sugar beets), whereas extracts of stevia (a white powder comprised of 85-95% steviosides) can range from 200 to 300 times sweeter. Furthermore, stevia is virtually calorie-free; stevia extracts are considered non-caloric. Stevia also does not affect blood sugar metabolism, nor does it promote the growth of microorganisms such as bacteria and yeasts.²⁻⁸

In addition to its virtues as a natural sweetener, stevia has been studied for its potential benefits in the treatment of diabetes. Preliminary research indicates that stevia may help reduce blood sugar levels. In one study, stevia extract increased glucose tolerance, significantly reducing plasma glucose levels during the test and after overnight fasting in all test volunteers. According to a more recent study, two substances in stevia (stevioside and steviol) have been shown to stimulate insulin secretion via a direct action on pancreatic beta cells—the beta cells of the pancreas respond to an increase in blood glucose levels by secreting the hormone insulin, which in turn, lowers blood glucose levels by promoting the rate at which glucose is taken up by cells in the body. Results of this study indicate that stevia compounds may have a potential benefit as antihyperglycemic agents in the treatment of Type II diabetes. Furthermore, even if stevia were unable to lower blood sugar levels, its use as a natural sweetener could reduce the sugar intake of diabetics and provide a significant step toward maintaining improved blood sugar control.^{2,3,5,6,8-11}

Stevia has also been studied for its ability to significantly inhibit the growth of plaque in the mouth and prevent tooth decay. Various sugars are fermented by bacteria in the mouth to produce acids that eat through tooth enamel, causing tooth decay and cavities. Stevia glycosides appear to be nonfermentable and are considered non-cariogenic (cavity-causing).^{2,3,8,12}

Additional research has been conducted to investigate stevia's effects as an anti-hypertensive agent. Animal studies show that stevia dilates blood vessels and produces a diuretic effect which may help reduce high blood pressure. A recent double-blind, placebo-controlled human study was conducted involving 106 hypertensive subjects. After 3 months of treatment with 250mg of stevioside taken three times a day, systolic and diastolic blood pressure decreased significantly and the effect continued during the course of the 1 year study. Researchers concluded that oral stevioside is a well-tolerated and effective therapy that may be considered as an alternative or supplementary therapy for hypertension.^{2,4,5,8,13,14}

Extensive reviews of animal and human data show stevia to be safe—it has been thoroughly tested in dozens of studies world-wide and found to be non-toxic. Research from Japan, where stevia is widely used as a tabletop sweetener, confirms that stevia is safe as a food additive. In fact, there have been no known cases of stevia overdose or toxicity to humans reported anywhere in the world over the last 40 years.²⁻⁷

Stevia can be added to a variety of foods to sweeten their taste, without affecting the pancreas or adrenal glands and without adding calories. Stevia may even help quench carbohydrate cravings without interfering with blood sugar levels or adding unwanted pounds. Use stevia to make children's treats to help avoid tooth decay, weight gain and possible hyperactivity (associated with sucrose intake).^{3,5,8}

Stevia and stevioside extracts are extremely heat-stable in a variety of baking and cooking situations. However, stevia does not caramelize like sugar and meringues may also be difficult since stevia does not brown or crystallize as sugar does. Stevia also does not work well with yeast breads (those that require caloric forms of sugar in order to rise).^{2,3,5}

NSP's Stevia also contains fructooligosaccharides (FOS), which help to stimulate the growth of bifidobacteria and lactobacilli (healthy flora) in the colon and reduce the number of bacteria with pathogenic (disease-causing) potential.^{1,5}

References:

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