

Natural Sweeteners

Americans certainly love sweets! According to USDA figures, each of us consumed an average of 12.8 teaspoons daily of refined sugar in 2003.¹ It is no wonder that caloric sweeteners are considered the number one food additive.

But which is the best healthy alternative? Here you'll find information on the most common natural sweeteners, all of which are available on the shelves of most health-food stores and many supermarkets.

Agave Nectar

Agave Nectar is a natural sweetener made from the juice of the agave cactus. It is approximately 1.4 times sweeter than refined sugar, but does not create a "sugar rush," and is less disturbing to the body's blood sugar levels.

Amasake

Amasake is a traditional Japanese product made by fermenting sweet brown rice into a thick liquid. It is a creamy, quickly digested beverage used by athletes after a workout or as a sweetener in cooking or baking.

Barley Malt

Barley malt is created when fermenting bacteria in the grain turns its starch into sugars, mostly maltose. The final product is more of a "whole food" than some other sweeteners. It's not as sweet as sugar, so you may need to add up to 50% more in recipes.

Brown Rice Syrup

This product consists of brown rice that has been ground, cooked, and mixed with enzymes that change the starch into maltose. Brown rice syrup tastes like moderately sweet butterscotch and can be quite delicious. In recipes, you may have to use up to 50% more brown rice syrup than sugar, while reducing the amount of other liquids.

Date Sugar

Date sugar is not a sugar, but rather finely ground dates containing all of the fruit's nutrients and minerals. If you like the taste of dates, this will definitely appeal to you. Date sugar can be used as a direct replacement for sugar. While quite sweet, date sugar will not impart a sugary taste to cooked dishes.



Honey

One of the oldest natural sweeteners, honey is sweeter than sugar, with different flavors depending on the plant source. Some honeys are very dark and strongly flavored. Raw honey contains small amounts of enzymes, minerals, and vitamins.

Maple Syrup

Maple syrup adds a nice flavor to foods. Make sure you buy 100% pure maple syrup, not maple-flavored corn syrup. Organic varieties are best.

Molasses

Organic molasses is probably the most nutritious sweetener derived from sugar cane. Different types of molasses have different flavors, but most of them impart a very distinctive taste. Use less molasses than you would sugar. Sucanat is a brand name for an organic evaporated cane juice product that has been blended with organic molasses, and is 88% sucrose, with fructose and dextrose. It can be used like white sugar, but retains more of the vitamins and minerals of sugar cane.

Stevia

Stevia is an herb from the rainforests of the Amazon that has been used for centuries by native South Americans. The extract from stevia leaves is said to be 100 to 300 times sweeter than white sugar, and can be used in cooking and baking as well as drinks. Stevia extract does not affect blood sugar levels and has zero calories. Stevia is available in a powder or liquid in most natural food stores. Be sure to get the green or brown liquids or powders because the white and clear versions are highly refined, lack nutrients and can lead to imbalance.

Adapted from "The Cane Mutiny," New Age Magazine, March/April 1999.

1. USDA Sugar and Sweeteners Situation and Outlook Yearbook, Economic Research Service, July 2004, www.ers.usda.gov.

