Sweet Surprise: Are artificial sweeteners safe?

NutriCat answers your questions on the use, consumption and safety of sweeteners.

Safety of artificial sweeteners first came into question with the production of Aspartame (NutraSweet and Equal). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not consider the sweetener to have any perceivable harm. However, a new long-term animal test from an Italian cancer institute found increases in lymphomas, leukemia, and breast cancer in rats. The study showed these increases at a consumption rate of 7 sodas a day. Although that number seems high, remember the average fountain drink contains 2-3 cans of soda. Aspartame is also found in yogurt, candy, Kool-Aid, Jell-O pudding, and hundred of other products.

Saccharin is found in hundreds of ‘sugar-free’ products and is the product Sweet ‘N Low. Several studies show that the use of saccharin causes cancer of the bladder, uterus, ovaries, skin, and other organs. A major study done by the National Cancer Institute found use was associated with bladder cancer. As a result, the FDA banned Saccharin in 1997. After pressure from the diet-food industry, debates questioned the relevance of rat studies to human studies. Because of this, Congress asked the FDA to lift the ban. In May 2000, saccharin was on the Department of Health and Human Services list of cancer-causing substances even though the original research found the substance to be cancer-causing (carcinogenic).

Stevia is a “natural” sweetener used in products such as Truvia and PureVia. Just because a substance is natural, does not mean it is safe. High dosages fed to rats reduced sperm production and abnormal cell growth which could cause infertility. Several tests done by UCLA, found the substance to cause mutations and damage DNA. The FDA does consider Stevia to be “GRAS” (Generally Recognized As Safe).

So what is considered “safe”? Sucralose, under the brand-name Splenda is used in soft-drinks, ice cream, and no-sugar added baked goods. Most studies on Sucralose are conflicting, but one recent research from Duke suggest that Splenda may alter bacteria production in the gut. Although Sucralose is considered safer than other artificial sweeteners, it is usually used in combination with acesulfame-K. Studies suggest that this artificial sweetener may cause cancer, which would suggest that this product should be avoided.

In addition to artificial, no-calorie, sweeteners, lots of other products are used as sugar replacements. High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) consumption has been on the rise ever since the widespread introduction of it in the mid-80’s. HFCS is used to provide shelf stability and sweetness at a fraction of the cost of sugar. The main problem with HFCS isn’t the high amounts of fructose, the use of sugar is just as harmful as HFCS as we consume way too much of both. HFCS is actually about 1/2 fructose and 1/2 glucose— almost the same as regular table sugar. Agave nectar, a claimed ‘natural’ sweetener, is ironically much higher in fructose than HFCS. Some studies show that high consumption of fructose promotes obesity by increasing glucose intolerance. Agave nectar is usually sold in health food stores and is in all-natural, organic products.

Bottom Line: For your waist line and your health, try limiting consumption of both artificial sweeteners and real sugar.

*Any study that was considered bias either by researcher involvement or third party funded was not considered.*
Fatal fall rates are climbing for those 65 and older, here are a few ways to reduce your chances:

- Improve your balance. An easy way is to stand on one leg, eyes closed. Try this while brushing your teeth in the morning! Or try taking a tai-chi class.
- Build your strength: it is crucial for maintaining balance
- Get enough vitamin D; found in sunshine, most cereals, and milk
- Check your vision at least once a year. If you can’t see where you’re going, you increase your rate of trips and falls!

Freezer– Worthy Favorites: Healthy one-meal dishes you can make ahead. Perfect for cold weekday nights.

Shepherd’s Pie

1 carrot, diced
1/2 cup broccoli, finely chopped
1/2 cup cauliflower, chopped
1/2 cup green beans
1/2 cup green peas
1/2 cup mushrooms, slices
2 tbsp. + 2 tbsp. margarine
1/4 cup flour
1 cup vegetable broth
2/3 cup milk
2 tbsp chopped sage
4 potatoes, chopped
1/2 cup yogurt
1/2 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese (optional)

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Combine all vegetables and steam until tender. In a large saucepan, combine the vegetables, 2 tbsp Margarine, flour, broth, milk and sage. Cook until the sauce begins to thicken and add a bit salt and pepper, to taste. Set aside. Boil the potatoes until soft. Drain and mash with 2 tbsp Margarine, yogurt, and cheese. Spread the vegetables in a large baking dish, and spread the potato mixture on top. Seal tight and freeze for later. Or for immediate consumption, bake for 30–40 min.

If frozen: Preheat oven to 375°F. Cover casserole with foil and place on baking sheet. Bake 1 hour or until top is golden; remove foil last 15 minutes of baking. Let stand 5 min. before serving.

NutriCat wishes you and your family a safe and healthy holiday season and a very Happy New Year!!

Chili and Cornbread Hotdish*

2 15 oz. cans of kidney beans, drained
2 cups lean ground beef or vegetarian ground beef substitute
1 cup corn
2 15 oz. cans tomato sauce
2 tbsp. chili powder
1/4 tsp. cayenne pepper
1/2 tsp onion powder
1/2 tsp. garlic powder
1/2 tsp. cumin
3/4 cup cornmeal
3 cups water
1 tbsp. margarine
1/2 tsp. paprika

Pre-heat the oven to 375°F. In a large mixing bowl, combine beans, beef or beef substitute, corn, tomato sauce, and spices. Spread in the bottom of a 9X13” baking pan. In a medium sauce pan, combine the water, cornmeal and margarine and let stand for at least 10 minutes. Bring to a boil and cook for about 15 minutes, stirring frequently until done. Spread the cornmeal mixture over the bean mixture and allow to cool slightly. Seal tight and freeze for later. Or, for immediate consumption, Spread the paprika on top and bake for 20-25 minutes until cornbread topping is golden.

If frozen: Preheat oven to 375°F. Cover casserole with foil and bake for 50-60 minutes until cornbread topping is golden. Remove foil the last 15-20 minutes of baking time.

* “Hot Dish” is the term used for casseroles in the Midwest