



[Print this Page](#) 

[<< Back to Site](#)

published January 18, 2008
Sugar Substitutes: Nutra-Not-So-Sweet?

Some say sugar substitutes cause weight gain, but does that mean you should ditch the diet cola?

by Dawn Weinberger, Contributor



Freelance writer Dawn Weinberger lives in Portland, Ore., with her husband, Carl, and her cat, Lucy Lui. She covers health, fashion, pets and green living for several local and national publications.

If "lose weight" is at the top of your to-do list for 2008, you might want to think twice before stocking up on diet cola and sugar-free pudding snacks. Turns out these products can actually contribute to weight gain, according to some experts. Yep, you read that right--that beloved zero-calorie carbonated beverage might be making you fat.

On the surface, this concept doesn't make a lot of sense. Weight loss is all about creating a calorie deficit, so it seems logical that replacing sugar with Splenda® would accelerate the pound-shedding process (sugar has 16 calories per teaspoon; sugar substitutes are typically calorie free). But a study out of Purdue University suggests otherwise.

The study, "A Pavlovian Approach to the Problem of Obesity," was published in the July 2004 issue of the International Journal of Obesity. Authors Susan Swithers and Terry Davidson, professors in Purdue's Department of Psychological Sciences, found that artificial sweeteners "may disrupt the body's natural ability to 'count' calories based on foods' sweetness." In other words, if you snack on sugar-free foods and chug artificially sweetened beverages you might not satisfy your sweet tooth. The result? More snacking--and more calorie consumption--later on.

As a registered dietitian, Christine Mastrangelo of New England Nutrition Associates in Wakefield, Mass., says the study makes perfect sense to her.

"My assessment is that artificial sweeteners [inhibit] your understanding of what sweet is," Mastrangelo says.

She urges those trying to lose weight to avoid sugar substitutes altogether.

"I believe we should eat real food," she says, adding that consuming pure sugar in moderation is a far better choice (with diabetics being the exception, of course).

That advice only helps, though, if you know what "in moderation" really means. First of all, it doesn't mean one slice of cake a year (Mastrangelo says deprivation can lead to binging). Instead, consider replacing that huge bowlful of sugar-free, reduced-fat Rocky Road with a half-cup serving of regular ice cream. Or, skip the large sugar-free, nonfat white chocolate mocha (you don't even

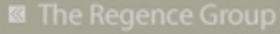
want to know how many calories are in this drink). Black coffee with a teaspoon of sugar and a small amount of half-and-half is just as satisfying. Finally, treat yourself to a regular cola now and then instead of polishing off a two-liter of diet every day.

Despite the Purdue study and dietitians like Mastrangelo who support its premise, not every expert agrees. Melanie Gillingham, R.D., Ph.D., an assistant professor in the departments of dietetics and nutrition at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, says sugar substitutes actually do have a place in a reduced-calorie diet.

"Some of them have been around for a really long time, and I think [they] are good options," Gillingham says. As for the study and others like it, she says it isn't cause for serious concern, because the data is lacking.

>> [Email the editor](#)

- [Fit for Life: Healthy Habits for a Whole New You](#)
- [Video: Life Without the Weight](#)
- [Adventures of a Fortysomething: Falling off the Exercise Wagon](#)

Brought to you by
 The Regence Group

©2008 Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon. All rights reserved. [Privacy Policy](#)
Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon is an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.