



Journey
through
Thyme

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Columnist

**Healthier
substitutes for
sugar in your
favorite treats**

Valentine’s Day is just around the corner, and that means loads of sugar in the form of chocolates, cupcakes and sweets galore.

Sugar is toxic and addictive, according to the experts interviewed for the CBS News show 60 Minutes a few years ago.

The program featured Eric Stice, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the Oregon Research Institute who has used MRI scans to conclude that sugar activates the same brain regions that are activated when a person consumes drugs like cocaine. It triggers the same reward centers as this dangerous drug, which shows that sugar is addictive.

Refined sugar takes your blood sugars on a roller coaster ride that brings you right back to the store grabbing for more. It’s a vicious cycle that many people struggle with. Sugar is associated with many chronic problems that include heart disease, diabetes, pain syndrome, ADD, chronic fatigue, autoimmune diseases, and decreased immunity.

Research suggests that one of the main causes for decreased immunity is that sugars inhibit the entrance of vitamin C into white blood cells, which then inhibits immunity. The more sugar, the less productive your white blood cells are, then the less immune you are.

There’s been some research that has shown that added sugars increase your risk of high blood pressure. Added sugars also may promote inflammation.

The average American consumes 136 pounds of added sugar every year. This is not sugar naturally present in foods like fruit and grains, but sugar that is added in baking, cooking and food processing. Half is usually refined sugar. The rest is mainly corn sweeteners used in industrial food processing.

Very little is from whole-some or less-processed sweeteners such as honey, maple syrup, molasses or fruit.

However, here is an idea to experiment with this Valentine’s Day using various sugar substitutes for more natural, healthful alternatives. It’s a chance to cut some sugar from your diet, while keeping the sweetness in.

Honey, an enduring favorite, is not only sweet, but it’s packed with many health benefits. More than 300 North American plants are used by bees to make honey. Flavors range from the dark, assertive honeys of buckwheat to the milder charms of clover or basswood and the delicacy of fireweed. Honey’s goodness comes partly from its fermentable carbohydrates, which support bifidobacteria—friends of our digestive tract. In its raw (unpasteurized) state, honey also contains protein, vitamins and antioxidants.

In desserts, lighter honeys are good for delicately flavored sweets; darker ones for some fruit pie fillings, dense

puddings and fruit cakes.

Then there is molasses, it’s what’s left after white sugar has been removed from the sap of the sugar-cane plant. This residue of refining contains the best nutrients.

Light molasses, left after the initial sugar extraction, is golden-colored and sweet, perfect in gingerbread, spice cakes, and as dessert sauces.

Blackstrap molasses, left after the final extraction, is stronger and slightly bitter, and is used only in small amounts. Blackstrap molasses is stocked with vitamins and minerals, being a good source of manganese, copper, iron, calcium, potassium, magnesium and vitamin B6. Unsulfured organic molasses is best.

When substituting molasses for refined sugar, baked goods will darken more quickly, so reduce oven temperature by 25 degrees. Also add extra baking soda (1 teaspoon per cup of molasses) to counteract the acidity.

Pure maple syrup contains a fair amount of sugar, so consume it minimally. However, it has nutrients such as antioxidants, calcium, iron and potassium, and you can cut your sugar consumption by about 33 percent by using maple syrup instead.

Using applesauce as one of your sugar substitutes means consuming fewer calories and taking in more fiber. Look for unsweetened brands or make your own applesauce to reap these benefits.

Fruits such as bananas, figs and dates can make excellent additions to a low-sugar diet. If you enjoy the flavor of bananas, you’ll get



Dark chocolate chip honey cookies

- 1-1/2 cups whole wheat pastry or oat flour
- 3/4 tsp. baking powder
- 1/2 tsp. coarse salt
- 1 cup peanut butter
- 1/2 cup honey
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 1 large egg
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1/2 cup dark chocolate chips
- Optional: 1/4 cup nuts

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder and salt until combined.

In the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment, cream peanut butter, honey, and butter on medium, until fluffy. Add egg and vanilla extract then whip until combined. Slowly add portions of the dry ingredients, just until combined. Fold in dark chocolate chips.

Use an ice cream or cookie scoop and place dollops of batter onto the baking sheet, one to two inches apart. Bake eight to 10 minutes or until browned.

more fiber and potassium with this option. Figs and dates provide minerals such as calcium and iron, and raisins are another good sugar substitute.

Coconut palm sugar comes from coconut tree sap and has a lower glycemic index than regular sugar. People with diabetes may prefer it to regular sugar for this reason. Try sprinkling some coconut palm sugar on your oatmeal or popcorn for added sweetness.

If you’re adventurous and enjoy trying new ingredients, check out a few additional natural sugar substitutes such as stevia, monk fruit, sweet potato syrup, tapioca syrup and fruit juice concentrate.

Some sweeteners supply antioxidants — substances that clean up unstable, damaging oxygen products in the body that can contribute to cancer, heart disease and degenerative disorders. Biochemists at Virginia Tech have analyzed various sweeteners, including molasses, date sugar, brown rice syrup, barley malt syrup, agave nectar and honey. Blackstrap or dark molasses and date sugar were the best antioxidant sources.

All these sugar substitutes are better for you than regular white sugar and are worth trying in a variety of recipes.



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