



HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

ARTIFICIAL SWEETENERS: GOOD OR BAD?

If you're trying to lose weight by cutting back on sugar, you may be opting for foods and drinks labelled as "sugar free" to satisfy your sweet cravings.

According to Harvard Health experts, about 40 per cent of adults use sweeteners on a daily basis, most commonly in beverages such as tea and coffee. Sweeteners are also commonly used in many processed foods and other beverages, including:

- canned foods, such as jams
- dairy products, like yoghurts and milkshakes
- baked goods, biscuits, and desserts
- soft drinks, iced tea, tonics, and powdered drink mixes.

Whilst these products have fewer kilojoules (kJ) compared to their sugary counterparts, critics of artificial sweeteners say that they may cause a variety of health problems. Here's looking at the good, the bad, and other facts about using artificial sweeteners, so you can decide for yourself whether they are a healthy option for you.

Health benefits of artificial sweeteners

According to Mayo Clinic, one of the benefits of artificial sweeteners is that they "don't contribute to tooth decay and cavities." In addition, they can assist with:

- Weight management – for example, switching from drinking regular soda to diet soda will reduce one's total kJ consumption (however, water is still a better choice).

- Diabetes management – since they generally don't raise blood sugar levels.

Possible health concerns

Studies over the years have raised concerns that artificial sweeteners are linked to various health problems, including cancers. However, these studies were mostly tested on lab rats and there have since been counter-studies negating safety concerns in the use of these products.

It's also important to bear in mind that there are many different types of sugar substitutes, which may have various side effects. For example:

- Sugar alcohols like Xylitol, when consumed in large amounts, "can have a laxative effect, causing bloating, intestinal gas and diarrhoea," states Mayo Clinic.
- Stevia, derived from stevia leaves, acts as a diuretic and may impact the kidneys over long-term use, according to Medical News Today.
- Aspartame, one of the most popular sugar substitutes, has inconclusively been thought to be linked to a multitude of health problems including cancers, headaches, seizures, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Alzheimer's disease.

As mentioned above, Healthline experts say that "research is ongoing to confirm or invalidate connections between these ailments [and the use of artificial sweeteners]," where currently, the outcomes are still inconsistent. Like with most things, moderation is key and remember, there is no substitute for a healthy diet and drinking plenty of water.