

Personal worldview essay



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Agave may be one of the most popular natural sweeteners today, but its rise in popularity in the U. S. didn't begin until around 2003. Now it's commonly used as an alternative to sugar, honey, or maple syrup for cooking, baking, and sweetening everything from coffee to oatmeal. Agave nectar (or syrup) is produced from the agave plant – the same plant used to make tequila. It tastes similar to honey with a hint of molasses and is manufactured by extracting the juice from the plant's core, which is then filtered, heated or treated with enzymes and concentrated until it becomes a syrupy liquid.

Proponents of this natural sweetener claim that it's a healthy alternative to sugar, honey, and other sweeteners because of its low glycemic index. It's advertised as ideal for people who are watching their weight or folks with diabetes who are working to lower their blood sugar levels. But before you add agave nectar to your grocery list, here's what the heck you need to know. Agave nectar contains up to 90 percent fructose. That's significantly more than table sugar, which is 50 percent fructose (and 50 percent glucose) once it's broken down by your body.

Agave's high fructose content gives it advantages and disadvantages. The good part first: Because fructose has a low glycemic index, agave doesn't cause your blood sugars to spike as rapidly after eating it, which means it can temper the sugar rush that occurs after eating something sweet. And even though agave and white sugar contain approximately the same number of calories, agave is markedly sweeter. That means you can get away with using less to flavor your coffee, morning oatmeal, or baked goods and potentially save yourself a few calories. Now for the bad part.

The high fructose content in agave can have some undesirable health effects. Studies have shown that large amounts of fructose can increase blood-triglyceride levels, and high triglycerides are a known risk factor for heart disease. In addition, some people have trouble absorbing fructose, so eating it can cause bloating, gas and abdominal discomfort. Agave can be especially problematic for people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). The Verdict: Should You Switch to Agave? As with so many issues in nutrition, the health-related pros and cons of agave aren't clear-cut.

My feeling is, if you're only using a few teaspoons of sweetener a day, the differences are negligible and you can choose whichever one you prefer. In other words, limiting the total amount of sweetener you're using will have a much bigger impact on your health than altering the type of sugar you use. With that in mind, don't use agave as an excuse to pump more sweet stuff into your diet just because it has a lower glycemic index. Most of us consume far more sugar in all forms than we should. And if agave is your sweetener of choice, just remember to keep your intake to no more than one tablespoon (that's three teaspoons) TOTAL per day.