

ALL ABOUT SWEETENERS

While the detrimental effects of refined sweeteners such as white sugar and corn syrup are still being debated, there's little doubt that Americans consume far too much of it. While natural sweeteners aren't nutritional bell ringers, they are generally considered to produce less of a shock to the body's blood sugar level because among the nutrients found in whole food sugars are necessary minerals that help with sugar metabolism.

Refined White Sugar - The two major types of refined sugar produced in the United States are beet sugar and cane sugar. They are both composed of sucrose.

Brown Sugar - Brown sugar is simply refined white sugar with a bit of fancy molasses to give texture and color. Everything that you use white and brown sugar for can be replaced with Sucanat (see below).

Confectioners' or powdered sugar - It is simply granulated sugar that has been crushed into a powder.

Raw Sugar - Raw sugar is the residue left after sugarcane has been processed to remove molasses and refine sugar crystals. Some labels on sugar packages seem to indicate that the product is raw sugar, but all commercial sugar has undergone some refining. Genuine raw sugar cannot be bought and sold to the general consumer in the United States according to Food and Drug Administration regulations, as it is unfit for human consumption.

Turbinado - Turbinado sugar is a product that is made by separating raw cane sugar crystals in a centrifuge (turbines) and washing them with steam. Turbinado sugar does not pass through a bone char filter, as is some refined white sugars, because its brown color is desirable. Exchange for white sugar measure for measure.

Sucanat - The trade name for this product stands for SUGar CAne NATural, and is made from evaporated sugar cane juice. It is then milled into granules much the same size as white sugar, but with a tawny hue. Sucanat is about 88% sucrose, or simple sugar, as compared to table sugar, which is 99% sucrose, but it retains more vitamins, minerals, and other trace nutrients found in sugar cane. Sucanat has a mild but distinct flavor, with a hint of molasses. As an all-purpose sweetener for baking, cooking, and in hot or cold drinks, use it as a 1-to-1 replacement for white sugar.

Natural and Organic Sugar - Such as certified organically grown from Florida Crystals, these sweeteners are minimally processed sugar cane. The syrup is dehydrated, then milled into a powder. Exchanged measure for measure.

Date Sugar - Not actually a sugar in the conventional sense, date sugar is ground from dehydrated dates, but it's a great source of sweetness. Dates are high in fiber and rich in a wide variety of vitamins and minerals. Date sugar can be exchanged measure for measure for sugar in baking, for cakes, muffins, and quick breads. Use it in place of brown sugar to make crumb toppings for pies and fruit crisps. It can't be used to sweeten beverages, though, as the tiny pieces won't dissolve.

Fructose - Derived from fruit sugar, this sweetener closely resembles granular white sugar but is more concentrated so that less is needed for a similar effect--about 1/2 cup fructose to 1 cup of sugar. Though fructose has little nutritional value, it is generally believed that it doesn't disturb the blood sugar level as much as sucrose and is thus safer for diabetics, hyperglycemics, and hypoglycemics.

Maple Syrup – The boiled-down sap of maple trees. It takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup. Not all maple syrup is pure; some contains traces of formaldehyde, a carcinogen, so it is best to buy organic maple syrup. Substitute 2/3 to 3/4 cup maple syrup for 1 cup white sugar. (If using as a replacement in baked goods, reduce liquid in recipe by 3 tablespoons and add 1/4 teaspoon baking soda per cup of maple syrup.)

Molasses - Unsulphured molasses is made from the juice of sun-ripened cane; sulfured molasses is a byproduct of refined sugar; blackstrap molasses is the residue of the cane syrup after the sugar crystals have been separated. It is very nutritious, with high levels of calcium, iron, and potassium.

Rice Syrup - A traditional Asian sweetener, brown rice syrup is made from rice starch converted into maltose, a complex sugar. Rice syrup is the mildest-flavored of the liquid sweeteners and contains trace amounts of B vitamins and minerals. Use it interchangeably with honey in cooking and baking, to sweeten hot or cold beverages and cereals, or as a spread for fresh breads.