

The Agave Nectar Debate

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Agave Nectar is the latest, largely hyped and marketed sweetener. As the public is becoming educated and in their knowledge rightfully moving away from white sugar as well as high fructose corn syrup (HFCS), many are reaching for Agave Nectar as an advertised safer choice of sweetener.

The claim is made that agave is 'diabetic friendly', 'raw' and a '100% natural sweetener'. It is available as syrup and nectar as well as crystals and can be found as an increasingly common ingredient in bottled teas, energy drinks, nutrition bars and desserts. The debate is on, however, as to its health declarations.

Here are some of the controversies:

The claim is that the sweetener is made from the sap of the agave plant and reduced by enzymes to a sweet syrup three times the sweetness of sugar. In that, less sugar would be needed to sweeten your food and drinks. Yes, some of the agave products are produced this way. Some, however, are made from the starch of the giant root bulb of the agave plant. The starch is then converted into 'nectar' by a process similar to the process by which corn starch is converted into high fructose corn syrup (HFCS).

Debate continues over the manufacturing methods used and whether what you are buying is pure agave syrup. There is an increasing amount of fraudulent, low-quality agave products in the marketplace, so buyer beware. Read your labels carefully. Some have added Sucrose (table sugar), Mannitol (man made filler), and Maltose which comes from Corn Syrup. Too, there is evidence of some of the agave products being laced with HFCS to lower production costs while increasing the profit margin. The quality of the agave that is added commercially to foods comes into question. There is a good chance it might be the less expensive, adulterated version.

Agave claims to be diabetic friendly and is labeled as 'low glycemic'. The truth is that agave offers no advantage in terms of caloric content: about 16 calories per teaspoon, the same as table sugar. But the syrup's chemical makeup differs significantly from that of other sweeteners. Whereas table sugar is composed of sucrose, which is broken down to yield half fructose and half glucose, agave can contain up to 90% fructose. That increase in fructose means -- theoretically, at least -- that agave nectar doesn't result in the same dangerous spikes in blood glucose that other sweeteners can cause in diabetics.

While high fructose agave won't spike blood sugar levels, there are numerous problems associated with the consumption of fructose in such high concentrations. Fructose is a source of fuel that your liver converts to fat and cholesterol. Even the medical community is very concerned about increasing fructose consumption as it may cause liver damage as well as obesity.

Research suggests that concentrated fructose actually promotes blood sugar issues more readily than glucose. This is because glucose is metabolized by every cell in the body and fructose must be metabolized by the liver. Fructose can contribute to diabetic conditions as it reduces the sensitivity of insulin receptors, the way glucose enters a cell to be metabolized. As a result, the body needs to make more insulin to handle the same amount of glucose.

Agave has an unusually high concentration of fructose (70-90%) compared to the small amount of glucose (10-30%). Nowhere in nature does this ratio of fructose to glucose occur naturally. One of the next closest foods that contain almost this concentration of glucose to fructose is high fructose corn syrup, which only contains 55% fructose. To claim that agave is better for you than HFCS may even be a stretch.

This isn't to say that all fructose is bad, for it is a primary sugar in whole fruits. Whole fruits, however, generally contain a much smaller amount of fructose compared to sucrose and glucose. In addition, fruits contain vitamins, minerals, phytonutrients, fiber, and other nutrients. Our bodies are designed to digest a complete "package" of nutrition that appears in whole, fresh, ripe fruits.

So, before jumping on the agave nectar bandwagon...more education is needed and on the way.

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