Sugar Alcohols

What They Are

Sugar alcohols are **carbohydrates** that chemically have characteristics of both sugars and alcohols. However, sugar alcohols do not contain the type of alcohol found in alcoholic beverages.

Where They Are Found

Sugar alcohols are found **naturally** in small amounts in a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Sugar alcohols are also **commercially produced** from sugars and starch. Commercially produced sugar alcohols are added to foods as reduced-calorie sweeteners and are found in many sugar-free and reduced-sugar products, including:

- Baked goods (such as cakes, cookies, and pies)
- Chewing gum
- Desserts (such as ice cream, other frozen desserts, and puddings)
- Flavored jam and jelly spreads
- Ready-to-use frostings
- Sweets (such as hard and soft candies)

What They Do

- Sugar alcohols provide a sweet taste with fewer calories per gram than sugar, and are commonly used in place of sugar and often in combination with artificial sweeteners.
- Sugar alcohols in food add bulk and texture, help retain moisture, and prevent browning that occurs during heating.
- Sugar alcohols produce a cooling sensation in the mouth when added to foods in high concentrations (for example, in sugar-free hard candy or chewing gum).
- Unlike sugar, sugar alcohols do not react with plaque bacteria in the mouth. So, they do not cause cavities.

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Health Facts

- Sugar alcohols are slowly and incompletely absorbed from the small intestine into the blood. As a result, they provide **fewer calories** per gram than sugar and produce a smaller change in blood glucose (often referred to as blood sugar) than other carbohydrates.
- Sugar alcohols can also produce **abdominal gas, bloating, and diarrhea in some individuals** because they are not completely absorbed by the body and are fermented by bacteria in the large intestine. For this reason, foods that contain the sugar alcohols **sorbitol** or **mannitol** must include a **warning** on their label that states "excess consumption may have a laxative effect."

Action Steps

For Monitoring Sugar Alcohols in Your Diet

Use the **Nutrition Facts** label as a tool for monitoring consumption of sugar alcohols. Food manufacturers may *voluntarily* list the amount in grams (g) per serving of sugar alcohols on the Nutrition Facts label (under Total Carbohydrate). They may also list the name of a specific sugar alcohol if only one is added to the food. But, food manufacturers are *required* to list sugar alcohols if a statement is made on the package labeling about the health effects of sugar alcohols or sugars (when sugar alcohols are present in the food).

- ☐ Look for sugar alcohols on the ingredient list on a food package. Some examples of sugar alcohols are erythritol, hydrogenated starch hydrolysates (HSH), isomalt, lactitol, maltitol, mannitol, sorbitol, and xylitol.

  Tip: Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight—the closer an ingredient is to the beginning of the list, the more of that ingredient is in the food.

- ☐ When choosing "sugar-free" foods containing sugar alcohols, remember to use the Nutrition Facts label to compare the calories and nutrients in the sugar-free version to the regular version. These products may still have a significant amount of calories, carbohydrate, and fat.