

Script – Print – Sugar substitutes and weight loss aren't friends

If you're thinking about using sugar substitutes to help with weight loss, think again. That's the word from the World Health Organization (WHO).

According to new guidelines, replacing free sugars with non-sugar sweeteners (NNS) doesn't help people control their weight long-term. The WHO first issued guidelines on sugar intake in 2015, recommending that adults and children reduce their daily intake of free sugars to less than 10% of their total energy intake.

The latest review added that there might be "potential undesirable effects" from the long-term use of sugar substitutes such as an increased risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. There were 283 studies included in the review.

Jason Crum, a dietitian with OSF HealthCare, agrees and adds there could be other potential risks.

"When you look at sugar substitutes, it's more why am I using the sugar substitutes? If I'm quickly replacing calories because I don't want calories from a can of Coca Cola or Pepsi, a sugar substitute would be something quicker to use," he says. "However, most people are doing it for a long time, which is creating other problems."

Those problems start with the gut.

"We create dysbiosis – that altered gut bacteria," Crum says. "They use the energy differently, and they make other products out of it, which we in turn absorb. And that messes with our receptors, our ability to understand what's going on in our gut. It triggers more cravings for those sugary foods anyway, it even helps us eat more, which can be an adverse thing for most people."

Instead, experts say that other ways to reduce free sugars intake include consuming food with naturally occurring sugars, like fruit, or unsweetened food and beverages. Crum says it comes down to making a lifestyle change.

"For most of my clients we don't want to expect weight loss by just simply avoiding the sugars and using sugar alcohols or sugar substitutes of a different type," says Crum. "It's looking at why they are consuming the sugary form in the first place? They could have an imbalanced dietary intake, it could be eating foods at the wrong times, it could be emotionally eating. If you're going to have a sugar substitute, you're not quelling that emotional response anymore. So it makes those cravings worse later in the day, and you might end up eating more total calories than if you had something that had the sugar in it."

Crum recommends people pay close attention to food labels when making decisions about sugar substitutes.

"What are the nutrition facts label telling me? Do I understand what a total carb is? Do I understand what the sugar is under there? Every four grams of added sugar is equivalent to one teaspoon, so if you have 12 grams of added sugar you have three teaspoons of sugar right there," he says. "So, understanding that gives people an idea of where am I really at here."

Crum says the bottom-line is don't rely on sugar substitutes. If you do, you'll end up craving more and eating more. Instead, evaluate why you're selecting the foods you eat in the first place. It will make things easier in the long run rather than cutting out certain foods all at once. Going cold turkey, he adds, seldom works for most people.