

Stevia - The Zero Calorie Natural Herb and FDA Approved Dietary Supplement

You may not believe it, but stevia's main extract, stevioside is about 300 times as sweet as table sugar. Even its dried leaves are at least 30 times sweeter than sugar. What is extremely surprising is that Stevia has no calories, no carbs, no synthetic sweeteners like saccharin or aspartame (better known as Equal and NutraSweet) and no adverse effects on diabetics. More than that, many claim that it possessed several beneficial medicinal properties, although scientific studies have yet to confirm and evaluate such claims.

Origins of Stevia Stevia is a native of two South American countries Paraguay and Brazil. For hundreds of years, people there used it to sweeten their beverages. Now several countries in the Far East, Asia and South East Asia are cultivating and using it for similar uses. China is presently its largest producer and Japan is using it extensively in its pickles and in various other food products for sweetening. Japanese diet coke has stevia sweetening it. Several other countries like Thailand, Malaysia and India are also cultivating the herb and using it.

Use of Stevia in the US However, the Food and Drug Administration of the United States has approved it only as a dietary supplement and not yet as a food additive. It does not allow any mention of the sweetening aspect of Stevia on the packing label or in ads. There is a lot of controversy on the FDA stance. Stevia is safe because FDA has approved it as a dietary supplement. Do FDA authorities consider it unsafe when it comes to approving Stevia as a food additive? What is their logic? Does it have anything to do with the lobbying of the powerful sugar industry against Stevia? Logic or no logic, Canada and the European Union are one with the US in not allowing Stevia as a food additive. Australia and Singapore are no different. In all these countries, while you will not hear much about many of the proven toxic effects or other known side effects of the widespread use of artificial sweeteners, you will find a lot of opposition to stevia, although based on insufficient data. Toxicologists and other scientists have many unresolved concerns regarding Stevia. There are some studies on animals, which indicate that stevia inhibits sperm-production in males and, because of it, females produce smaller babies. There are worries about the cancer-producing properties of some stevia-derivatives. Besides, there are suspicions that the herb adversely affects metabolism. Nevertheless, in all these cases, you cannot get any conclusive proof. Most of these claims are based on hearsay and are really meaningless. For years scientists claimed that Nutrasweet could be carcinogenic, however, what they didn't tell you was that test were done on lab rats by injecting them with the equivalent of dozens of servings of it per day.

Waiting for approval In the meantime, look at the several benefits that the people using stevia have been enjoying. This natural herb, they say, is safe beyond any doubt whatsoever. It is non-toxic. Its use does not add calories to your body. On the contrary, they believe it reduces obesity/weight, as it lowers their level of craving for sweets. It prevents tooth-decay. Both diabetics and hypoglycemics contend that stevia balances their blood-sugar levels. It improves metabolism. More than any thing else, stevia beats artificial sweeteners hands down in that it does not carry any of their many known risks or side effects that those in power have conveniently ignored.

About the Author

American Museum of Natural History extends its exhibits and knowledge through this monthly.

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