

Aspartame is an artificial sweetener found in many of the foods we consume every day, including soft drinks, chewing gum, breakfast cereals and jams. Even though it is FDA approved, many dietitians and nutritionists warn against its use, wary of the claim that it can deliver the taste of sugar without any of the health drawbacks.

Official complaints to the FDA about aspartame use include headaches and gastrointestinal problems. Detractors like Dr. Joseph Mercola, author of "Sweet Deception," say that aspartame consumption can actually contribute to weight gain and even cause neurological side effects such as migraines and brain tumors due to a disturbance of the dopamine and serotonin balance.

An aspartame producer has recently rebranded the product under a new name, AminoSweet, which sounds healthy (amino acids are the building blocks of protein), but is it?

Marissa Lippert, a registered dietitian and a New York City nutritionist and author of "The Cheater's Diet," says that although the research is inconclusive regarding the long-term health risks of aspartame, people should think twice about consuming it.

"Saccharin has been linked to cancer," says Lippert. "Artificial sweeteners like aspartame can indeed cause digestive distress (bloating, diuretic effects, diarrhea, etc.). Bottom line: It's still an artificially/chemically processed item."

In her practice, Nourish Nutrition Counseling & Communications, Lippert recommends her clients eschew "fake foods" in favor of an all-natural diet.

If a product is labeled "sugar free," "no sugar added" or "light," it most likely contains aspartame or some type of artificial sweetener. While Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi are obvious culprits, you may be surprised that some seemingly healthy foods, like most nonfat, flavored yogurts (including some varieties of Dannon's Light & Fit),



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contain aspartame.

Even some of the most trusted brands are adding the controversial sweetener to their foods. Smucker's Sugar Free Breakfast Syrup has it, as do the company's light and sugar-free strawberry preserves. Tofutti chocolate fudge treats and Edy's Grand Fat Free No Sugar Added Vanilla Swirl also contain aspartame.

Dieters have long believed that the best way to reduce their waistlines was to eat "light" or artificially sweetened foods instead of those containing sugar. Although it seems counterintuitive, it may actually be more beneficial to weight loss to eat a small amount of real ice cream than the lower-calorie stuff.

"Research is now indicating that sweeteners may actually cause people to gain weight because of a negative metabolic response," says Lippert. "They can also increase sweet cravings and alter our taste buds in terms of our 'threshold' for sweetness. Aspartame is 200 times sweeter than sugar, and Splenda is 600 times sweeter."

So if you're a four-can-a-day diet soda

drinker, do you have a chance of kicking the aspartame habit?

"I actually help clients to wean themselves off of sweeteners and even the biggest addicts can be successful," says Lippert. "Switch to natural sources of sweetness — fresh fruit, honey, sugar in the raw, agave nectar. Flavored seltzer and flavored unsweetened iced tea is a great way to swap your diet soda for something other than regular water. Retrain your taste buds to appreciate natural sweetness, and you'll feel and taste a significant difference."

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