When a label on a food product says “REFINED SUGAR FREE” and “NATURAL SWEETENER” it can be easy to assume this means sugar free. Or at least it’s a much healthier alternative to sugar. But is this necessarily the case?

When I’ve given up refined sugar in the past, I’ve simply replaced sugar in my baking, like for like, with one of the commonly used natural alternatives, such as coconut nectar or agave. Job done. It’s only since I’ve had to cut down for more pressing health reasons that I’ve started to look under the bonnet of some of these labels and seen that in quite a few cases the food or the sweetener itself is not quite as sugar free, or as healthy as I’ve assumed - nor as it’s promoted to be.

If you’re wanting to cut out or cut down on sugar, this is an added challenge. I think this also accounts for why no-one caters for people on low sugar diets. Food producers who replace sugar with something natural and sweet in their “sugar free” food, in a similar quantity, maybe think this is enough to cover the low sugar diet requirement. Just like I used to do. Or perhaps there’s too much complication and conflicting information around the subject for them to want to even tackle it.

I’m sharing a list of natural sweeteners and their properties that I’ve been putting together to help with my own baking choices – just in case it’s of interest or use to you. It uses 2 criteria - the amount of carbohydrates that are sugar and the glycemic level. (The glycamic level refers to the rate at which sugars are absorbed by the body – ie the “sugar rush”).

But there can be other factors to consider. Did you know, for instance, that agave syrup contains more fructose than refined sugar and as much as corn syrup? Fructose in large enough quantities can damage the body too.

It’s not that straightforward is it?

SO WHAT DO YOU DO?

Whilst some natural sweeteners are certainly more suitable for a low sugar diet than others, there's no miracle replacement as such. These days I try to be more discerning with my choice of natural sweetener and I use small quantities. We've become accustomed to food that's super sweet. But if you stop eating it, you stop wanting it. The same applies to food that's been over- sweetened with natural alternatives. Cut the sweetness down and you become genuinely satisfied with a much more subtle and natural level of sweetness.

	Carbohydrates per 100g	Carbohydrate of which are sugar per 100g	Glycaemic Index rating
Refined Sugar	99.2g	99.2g	68
Maple Syrup	89g	87.9g	54
Honey	81.5g	80.8g	35-65
Coconut nectar	74.8g	72.2g	35-50
Rice Malt Syrup	79g	54g	98
Carob Syrup	95.9g	63.4g	15
Dates	69.7g	64g	42
Agave Syrup	77.7g	66.g	15
Yacon Syrup	67.5g	33g*	4
Peruvian Carob (Algarroba)	65g	43g	7
Lucuma Powder	66g	17g	25
Maltitol (syrup)	17g	0g	52
Maltitol (powder)			35
Erythritol	0g	0g	1
Xylitol	0g	0g	12
Monkfruit (Luo Han Guo)	4g	0g	0
Stevia	0g	0g	0

Glycaemic Index	Carbohydrates of which are sugars per 100g
Below 55 = low	Below 5g per 100g = low
56-69 = Medium	Above 15g per 100g = high
Above 70 = High	

*The sugars in Yacon Syrup are Fructooligossacharides (FOS). These are a type of sugar that pass through the body undigested. Making them suitable for people on low sugar diets.

http://www.cakespirit.co.uk/