

Does “Refined Sugar free” and “Natural Sweetener” mean the same as sugar free? (Updated November 2023)

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 on sugar 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 assumednor as it’s promoted to be.

Is this why there’s so few genuinely low sugar products available?

If you’re wanting to cut out or cut down on sugar, this is an a challenge. It may also account for why so few food producers, cafes and restaurants cater 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, perhaps 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 go there.

How can we tell if a sweetener is suitable for a low sugar diet?

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

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 significant quantities will 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 very sugary food, you’ll stop wanting it. The same applies to food that’s been over-sweetened with natural refined sugar alternatives. *Cut the sweetness down* and you become genuinely satisfied with a much more subtle and natural level of sweetness.

Do natural sweeteners have more nutritional value than sugar?

One reason for the promotion of some natural alternatives over refined sugar is their nutritional value. Refined sugar is empty calories. But the damage to our health from refined sugar comes

from its sugar content – not its absence of nutrition. Many natural sweeteners contain sugars in some shape or form. Some in significant amount.

	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	4g	7
Lucuma Powder	66g	17g	25
Maltitol (syrup)	17g	0g	52
Maltitol (powder)			35
Allulose	5g	0g	0
Inulin syrup	14g	14g	1
Inulin powder	8g	4g	1
Erythritol	0g	0g	1
Xylitol ***	0g	0g	12
Monkfruit (Luo Han Guo)	4g	0g	0
Stevia	0g	0g	0

Glycaemic Index

Below 55 = low

56-69 = Medium

Above 70 = High

Carbohydrates of which are sugars per 100g

Below 5g per 100g = low

Above 15g per 100g = high

* agave higher in fructose than refined sugar

** The sugars in yacon syrup are fructooligosaccharides. (FOS) these sugars pass undigested through the body. Making them suitable for people on low sugar diets

*** xylitol is toxic for dogs