



# Sugar matters— Understanding the new low-calorie consumer

For decades, American consumers have been inundated with messages about what to eat. Eat more protein. Avoid carbohydrates. Don't eat gluten. Fat is bad. Fat is good. And now it's about sugar.

Some science is linking too much sugar intake to the rising rates of obesity and resulting prevalence of diabetes and heart disease. The average American is still consuming too many extra calories— equivalent to approximately 22 teaspoons of sugar per day (or 355 extra calories), according to the American Heart Association. The organization is now advising that people reduce that intake by close to two-thirds or down to 6 teaspoons (100 calories).

Though this would seem to be a great opportunity for products made with new sweetener technologies or sugar-reduction alternatives, there are so many different options now showing up in products, consumers may be more informed but just as confused as ever.

Weight-conscious shoppers are top of the list. They have been on a roller coaster ride trying to stay on top of the flip in thinking about fats and sugar, according to Julian Mellentin, editor of *New Nutrition Business* and author of the annual report *10 Key Trends in Food and Nutrition*. Mellentin says the recent rehabilitation of fat is inextricably tied with the fall of sugar and the current re-shaping of the consumer landscape

At the same time, broadening numbers of consumers from health enthusiasts to weekend warriors are looking to low-calorie and reduced sugar products to help them achieve an ever expanding set of dietary goals. These trends are propelling sales of low-calorie foods, which are expected to reach \$10 billion by 2019, according to figures from Transparency Market Research (TMR). But as the audience for such products widens, the quest to target these shoppers with specific products is more difficult than ever.

## Here are a few insights:

### Not just for dieters anymore

Low-calorie foods, touting zero- or low-calorie sweeteners, were once seen as a taste disaster, reserved for people who were diabetic or on a strict weight loss regimen with few other options. That's all changed, low-calorie products with reduced sugars now have a growing appeal for consumers who are more broadly health conscious. Sweeteners, such as stevia leaf extract and erythritol, have helped to drive this trend offering better taste and greater functionality in low-cal options with few additives, preservatives and a more natural health halo.

### Generation Gap

Weight loss as a market position, however, does not have universal appeal. In fact, age matters significantly. Consumers who are now most interested in weight loss benefits from foods now tend to be under age 50. According to IFIC's 12th Annual Food and Health Survey (2017), 78 percent of consumers most interested in products offering weight loss and management benefits are age 49 and under, while this attribute generates interest for only one in four of those age 50 and older. These older shoppers tend to be more interested in products touting benefits for cardiovascular health.

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## Taste Versus Calories

The winner is in the eye of the beholder. Consumers may say they are cutting back on their sugar intake, but that doesn't mean they will go right out and purchase every low-sugar cookie and yogurt they can find. In fact, calorie conscious consumers are all over the map when asked to articulate what they will tolerate with regard to tradeoffs in taste for health. Some want the same taste and indulgence, but will opt for a smaller serving size with a corresponding lower calorie count. Other shoppers have a high degree of acceptance for low-calorie products but it still largely depends on the product category. The idea of zero-calorie beverages are now broadly accepted but no- and low-calorie options are not yet as easily embraced in products like yogurt and bakery items.

## Affiliated Attitudes

The emergence of fads and lifestyle trends such as the paleo, gluten-free and ketogenic diets, are also complicating the picture. Each emphasizes different thinking about nutrition and food groups, not always based on sound science. As more people adopt these trends, their ideas about sugars, sweeteners and calories are often impacted by the philosophy of that lifestyle. For example, someone following a low carb or ketogenic diet may have no issues with artificial or high

intensity sweeteners, but those adhering to a paleo diet might stay away from products with ingredients they perceive as processed or artificial. These shoppers are more likely to gravitate toward foods and beverages perceived to contain only naturally occurring sugars.

## The Label-Friendly Conundrum

Along with interest in reducing sugar intake, today's diet and health conscious shoppers are also much more concerned about where their food is coming from, which has led to an added focus on label-friendly and recognizable ingredients in low-calorie products. While these attitudes have created an opportunity for natural sweeteners, it also presents a challenge. Some natural sweeteners, such as honey and agave, have a high natural perception, but in the end they are both still sugar, which can lead to some of the same health concerns. At the same time, ingredients such as erythritol, which may not sound natural, is actually a sugar alcohol that occurs naturally in pears, watermelon and grapes and commercially made via fermentation. Even though these consumers are well informed and often avid label readers, they may still be confused about natural and artificial sweeteners. Brands may need to do a better job of clarifying the value of sweeteners in their products.

Challenges to meet the demands of this rapidly evolving consumer group are not likely to ease up any time soon. New labeling requirements showing added sugars will put more focus on the negative perception of excessive sugar intake. The takeaway for product formulators may be to offer complete transparency about the sugar content in indulgent products and to work toward utilizing new sugar reduction ingredients in a wide variety of health and lower-calorie products.

### Sources

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