

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Alcohol in What Foods!

Observant readers of food labels will sometimes question what does it mean when the Nutrition Facts Label says there are Sugar Alcohols in their food. They were not expecting *Alcohol* in their cookies, the chewing gum, the can of tea or the toothpaste! How is a *sugar alcohol* any different from a regular alcohol, and why is it in that food? If you've noticed this ingredient and wondered too, here are some answers.

First, relax. They are not true alcohol and you won't get drunk on them. No one will suffer a hangover after eating them. They are made from various carbohydrates that have been slightly modified so that we can't digest them completely. The result is that they are lower in calories than sugar. Instead of 15 calories per teaspoon we only get about 8 calories. So sugar alcohols are often used in foods labeled reduced-calorie, low-calorie and sugar-free.

In some foods they might show up in the ingredient list but not in the Nutrition Facts box. They are just included in the amount of Total Carbohydrate. But if you can read the fine print of the ingredient list, you would see things like sorbitol, maltitol, or xylitol. The -ol ending is the give-away that these are sugar alcohols, another -ol. Not every sugar alcohol ends in -ol but the most common ones do. However, if the food is labeled "sugar free" or "no sugar added", but still contains these sugar alcohols, then they do have to be included in the Nutrition Facts in a separate line. And if the food contains more than 5 grams per serving, they must be labeled.

Why label them separately? They are safe. They're okay for adults, to give to children or the elderly, in small amounts. But, if a person eats too much they might suffer from diarrhea, gas or cramps. So any food with significant amounts must be labeled.

There were recently a few medical reports of people hospitalized for unexplained diarrhea and weight loss. While they were in the hospital the diarrhea stopped. As soon as they went home, it started again. Some medical detective work found that one person was chewing 4 packs of sugar-free gum a day! The other was sucking on sugar-free hard candies all day. Once they dropped the gum and candy habits, the diarrhea stopped too. These people were eating much more than the usual amount in a normal diet. If you're not over-doing it, you won't have to worry.

With this potential for side effects, some people will wonder why they should be used at all. Sugar alcohols do have several benefits. They do add a sweet flavor to foods. Most have a slightly minty flavor, so work very well in candies, gum and toothpastes. Because they reduce the total calorie count of the food they can help with weight control. Besides that, because they are digested more slowly and not completely absorbed into the blood, they can be very useful for people with diabetes, helping them control their blood sugar. And they do not promote tooth decay.

But remember, just because a package says 'sugar free' does not mean it is calorie free! Sugar alcohols still give us calories. The food may also have too much fat or sodium to be healthy too. And too much in a day can give us gas and cramps, or at worst, diarrhea. Sugar alcohols are very useful, very safe ingredients in many foods. But they are not a license to eat candy by the bagful!

Here's a recipe that uses the sugar Mother Nature put in sweet potatoes for its sweetness. These can be prepared in advance then reheated for Sunday dinner time to save you time. Use sweet potatoes that are dark orange inside. Not only do they look nicer but they are moister and stick together better too.

Mounds of Sweetness Potatoes

2 pounds dark orange sweet potatoes	1/3 Cup Florida orange juice
1 egg, or egg substitute equivalent	1 Tbsp grated orange peel
1/2 tsp ground nutmeg or cinnamon	1/4 C chopped nuts (pecans, walnuts)

Peel potatoes and cut into 1 inch chunks. Cover with water in saucepan and boil until tender, about 10-15 minutes. Drain and mash. Stir in juice, peel, beaten egg and spice. Preheat oven to 375° F. Spray baking sheet with nonstick spray. Spoon potatoes onto baking sheet in 10 mounds. Sprinkle nuts on top of each mound. Bake 30 min until hot in center. Serves 10.

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