Many people may think they have to give up sweets in order to lose or maintain their weight. However, low-calorie sweeteners such as stevia sweeteners offer a way to reduce calories in sweet-tasting foods and beverages, which may help you manage your weight. They also offer a way for people with diabetes to decrease overall carbohydrate intake.

Read on to learn everything you need to know about stevia sweeteners, including facts about nutrition, safety, uses, and benefits.
Highly purified stevia sweeteners (which we will refer to as stevia sweeteners) are a natural, no-calorie source of sweetness. They are composed of extracts known as highly purified steviol glycosides, which are taken from the sweetest part of the stevia plant. Like other low-calorie sweeteners, they are “intense” sweeteners − 200-300 times sweeter than sugar − meaning a very small amount provides a lot of sweetness.

Stevia sweeteners have a long history of safe use in many countries around the world. The stevia plant is native to South America. Today it can be found growing in many countries, including China, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, India, and South Korea. Hundreds of foods and beverages, such as certain juice and tea beverages, throughout the world are sweetened with stevia sweeteners. They are also available in tabletop sweetener products.

Before 2008, stevia sweeteners were not permitted in foods and beverages in the U.S. Since then, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has reviewed published research and experts’ conclusions about safety for several stevia sweeteners. FDA has raised no questions about the conclusions that these ingredients are Generally Recognized as Safe, or GRAS (see sidebar, “What is GRAS?”) As a result, foods and beverages containing stevia sweeteners are now available in the U.S.

Stevia sweeteners contain no calories. However, some products containing stevia sweeteners may contain other ingredients that have calories. These other ingredients may be used to provide the best flavor or texture. Typically, the amount of these other ingredients is very small, making the total calorie content very low. As a result, products containing stevia sweeteners may be labeled “light” or “reduced calorie.” Check the label for calorie information and for the presence of stevia sweeteners.

Stevia sweeteners offer a way to reduce total calorie intake throughout the day.

Stevia sweeteners and other low-calorie sweeteners add sweetness to foods and beverages without adding a significant amount of calories. Therefore, stevia sweeteners can expand food choices for people who want to consume fewer calories.
Are stevia sweeteners safe?
Yes. Many government authorities around the world have concluded that stevia sweeteners are safe for the general population, including children, people with diabetes, and women who are pregnant or nursing. Stevia sweeteners are permitted for use in many countries, including the European Union, Japan, China, Australia, Brazil, and the U.S. In the U.S., stevia sweeteners are GRAS, based on published research and expert opinions that have been reviewed by the FDA (See sidebar “What is GRAS?”) In addition, the FAO/WHO (Food and Agriculture Organization/World Health Organization) Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) completed a review of all available scientific data on stevia sweeteners in June 2008 and concluded that they are safe for use as general purpose sweeteners (See sidebar on Global Safety Recognition of Stevia Sweeteners).

Can people who have diabetes consume foods and beverages containing stevia sweeteners?
Yes. Stevia and other low-calorie sweeteners provide sweet-tasting, low-carbohydrate options for people with diabetes. Research shows that consuming stevia sweeteners does not increase blood glucose levels. Of course, a product containing stevia may still contain carbohydrates and calories. Therefore, always check the food label. If you have diabetes, a health professional, registered dietitian (RD) and/or certified diabetes educator (CDE) can work with you and your doctor to understand how foods and beverages containing stevia sweeteners fit into your diet.

Global Safety Recognition of Stevia Sweeteners
Stevia sweeteners are permitted for use in foods and beverages in countries around the globe. Government and scientific groups that have concluded that stevia sweeteners are safe include:

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)/World Health Organization (WHO) Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA)
- Food Standards Australia/New Zealand (FSANZ)
- French Agency for Food, Environmental, and Occupational Health & Safety (ANSES)

There is a long history of safe use of stevia sweeteners in countries around the world.
Are stevia sweeteners safe for children?

Yes. Stevia sweeteners are safe and useful options for children and adolescents, and can be included as part of a balanced diet rich in nutrients. Incorporating some low-calorie, sugar-free foods and beverages into meals and snacks is one way to avoid consuming excess calories. Health professionals, including registered dietitians (RD), can help parents make the best choices based on their child’s individual calorie and nutrition needs.

Can pregnant and breastfeeding women consume stevia sweeteners?

Yes. Research has shown that stevia sweeteners are safe for expecting or nursing mothers when consumed as part of a healthful diet. For women who consume foods and beverages containing low-calorie sweeteners, talk to your doctor or RD about consuming the necessary calories and nutrients for your baby’s growth.

Can stevia sweeteners cause weight gain?

No. Stevia sweeteners are low in calories and do not cause increased weight, appetite or preference for sweet tasting foods. Using low-calorie sweeteners in place of those with calories, such as sugar, can help you to consume fewer calories overall, helping you stay within your calorie budget. In other words, they help you to maintain your weight by balancing the calories you eat and drink with the calories you burn through physical activity and other day to day tasks. If weight loss is desired, then the calories you eat and drink must be less than the calories you burn.

Stevia sweeteners do not cause increased weight, appetite, or preference for sweet tasting foods.

A few researchers have suggested that consuming low-calorie sweeteners could lead people to eat more, causing weight gain. However, most experts agree that the current body of research does not support this idea and that low-calorie sweeteners can be effective in aiding weight loss or weight management. A few studies suggesting that low-calorie sweeteners were linked to increased appetite and preference for sweet tasting foods were small and limited in their application, and the larger body of research does not show a link. According to several scientific studies, low-calorie sweeteners do not cause people to feel hungrier or to eat more. In fact, low-calorie sweeteners such as stevia help to provide people who are trying to lose weight a greater variety of low-calorie food choices.
Stevia Sweeteners at a Glance

Scientific Names: rebaudioside A/reb A, rebiana, stevia, steviol glycosides, stevioside

Common names seen on food labels: Reb A, rebiana, stevia leaf extract, stevia extract

Brand Names: Enliten®, PureVia™, Stevia in the Raw™, Sun Crystals®, Sweetleaf Sweetener™, Truvia®, other store brands

Date Permitted in Foods and Beverages in the U.S.: 2008

Number of times sweeter than sugar: 200-300

Safe for children?: Yes
Safe for people with diabetes?: Yes
Safe for pregnant and breastfeeding women?: Yes
Use in cooking or baking?: Yes

Products That May Contain Stevia Sweeteners

The number of foods and beverage products available in the U.S. containing stevia sweeteners continues to grow and includes certain:

- Tabletop sweeteners
- Beverages (flavored waters, juices, teas, sodas, etc.)
- Baked goods (pastries, cereal bars, cookies, etc.)
- Yogurts
- Sauces (salad dressings, jams/jellies, etc.)
- Desserts and candies (ice cream, chocolate, hard candy, etc.)

Whether GRAS or a food additive, food ingredients must be safe. To be considered GRAS, an ingredient must meet one of the following two conditions:

1) A history of safe use has been established and a significant number of people consumed the ingredient prior to the enactment of the Food Drug and Cosmetic Act of 1958; or

2) Scientific data and information about the safety and use of the ingredient are widely known and publicly available in scientific articles, position papers, etc., with consensus among scientific experts that the ingredient is safe for its intended use.