



Health & Nutrition Letter

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Sugar-Free Shortcomings

For people with diabetes, sugar-free cookies are not a free ride

YOU OR someone in your family has been diagnosed with diabetes. So on your trips down the cookie aisle, you now pass up the sugar-laden Oreos, the Chips Ahoy, and the Mallo-mars and opt instead for sugar-free varieties: Murray Sugar-Free Chocolate Chip cookies, Snackwell's Sugar-Free Lemon Cremes, and Archway's Sugar-Free Oatmeal.

You don't like the taste of these cookies as much as the taste of Oreos or Chips Ahoy. And you don't like the price tag, either. They're often much more expensive. But the label on the sugar-free brands says the manufacturer is a "proud sponsor of the American Diabetes Association," and you know yourself that to keep down blood sugar and therefore avoid complications from diabetes, you have to stick

with the sugar-free stuff. Or do you?

The truth is that **sugar-free cookies are no better for people with diabetes than their sugary counterparts. That's right. It doesn't matter whether you buy the Sugar-Free Lemon Cremes or the Oreos.**

The only reason the "proud sponsor" wording gets on the package is that the cookie company gives money to the American Diabetes Association for research and advocacy. "In no way should the wording and the logo on the label be construed as an endorsement or seal of approval or call to choose one type of cookie over another," says the National Vice President for Clinical Affairs at the American Diabetes Association, Nathaniel Clark, MD, MS, RD.

How can a sugar-free cookie be no better for someone with diabetes than a regular one? The reason is that, for

the most part, it's the total amount of *carbohydrates* eaten that influences blood sugar, or glucose, levels in someone with diabetes, not just the amount of simple sugar. And the sugar-free versions have as many grams of carbohydrates as the regular cookies—and pretty much the same number of calories, too. That's because much of the carbohydrate in cookies comes from flour, not just sugar. Thus, taking out the sugar and putting in a sugar substitute doesn't really change things much. Indeed, often the substances used to replace sugar are not totally carbohydrate-free themselves.

That's why, as the box on page 6 shows, two Chips Ahoy cookies have 14 carbohydrate grams, just one more than two Murray Sugar-Free Chocolate

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Chip cookies. They also have a pretty much equal number of calories—about 100. Similarly, two Nabisco Mallomars have 17 grams of carbohydrate; one Archway's Sugar-Free Oatmeal cookie, 16. And the calorie difference is just 10. It's all too close to forego your favorite cookies for the sugar-free kinds.

In fact, the sugar-free brands get some people into more trouble than the regular varieties, says Janine Clifford-Murphy, a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator who counsels people with diabetes in the Boston area. "They think sugar-free means lower in calories," she explains, "so they end up eating more than they would of sugary cookies, piling on the calories and sometimes messing up their blood glucose because of all the carbohydrates in sugar-free cookies."

They sometimes mess up their digestive tracts, too. The sugar substitutes added to many of the sugar-free

Sugar-free cookies often have about the same number of carbohydrate grams as regular cookies, which means they're not any better for people with diabetes—or those looking to shed some pounds. They're also not better for budgeters, often costing considerably more than regular cookies.

Cookie	Calories	Carbohydrate (grams)	Price (cents)
1 Archway's Classic Oatmeal	100	17	25
1 Archway's Sugar-Free Oatmeal	110	16	36
2 Nabisco Mallomars	120	17	44
2 Nabisco Oreos	105	16	18
2 Nabisco Chips Ahoy	105	14	16
2 Murray Sugar-Free Chocolate Chip	100	13	29
2 Snackwell's Coconut Cremes	110	19	38
2 Snackwell's Sugar-Free Lemon Cremes	87	16	30

cookies are sugar alcohols such as sorbitol, isomalt, and maltitol, which cause intestinal discomfort and diarrhea in some people. That's why, when a sugar alcohol is the substitute used, there's a warning about these unpleasant side effects on the label.

Consumers should expect to see more and more sugar-free and no-sugar-added choices all over the supermarket. An estimated 17 million Americans have been diagnosed with diabetes. Another 16 million have impaired glucose toler-

ance, which means their blood sugar after meals is below the official cut-off point for diabetes but higher than normal, so they are at heightened risk for the disease. Marketers, including Hershey, plan to capitalize on those segments of the population by rolling out sugar-free versions of items like Reese's peanut butter cups and Hershey chocolate bars.

People can make sure they're doing right by themselves by checking the number of car-

bohydrates, which is listed in the Nutrition Facts panel on virtually all packaged supermarket items. In some foods, carbohydrate content will drop with a sugar-free version but not disappear altogether. In other cases, such as with soda, pancake syrup, jello, and popsicles, the carbohydrate content will drop considerably. These foods have little to no carbohydrates from non-sugar ingredients, and the sugar substitutes used—aspartame and sucralose—have almost no calories whatsoever.