

EXTENSION CONNECTION - Sugar Alcohols - Part 2

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Q. Last week's article described sugar alcohols used in foods. How do I know if they can be found in a food I am eating?

A. Consumers interested in the sugar alcohol content of foods can find relevant information in several places on the food label.

The ingredient list will show the individual name of each polyol (sugar alcohol) the product contains. The polyols commonly used include sorbitol, mannitol, xylitol, maltitol, maltitol syrup, lactitol, and isomalt.

The Nutrition Facts panel shows the total carbohydrate content of a food that includes the amount of any sugar alcohols in the product. The manufacturer may also declare voluntarily the number of grams of polyols in a serving of the product. If the product label uses the terms "sugar free" or "no added sugar," the polyol content must be declared separately under carbohydrates in the Nutrition Facts panel. If the product contains more than one polyol, the Nutrition Facts panel must use the term "sugar alcohol."

Consumers may see relatively new phrases such as "net carb," "low carb," or "impact carb" on the principal display panel of some products. These terms are not defined by the Food and Drug Administration. Generally, food manufacturers calculate "net carbohydrates" by subtracting the grams of fiber and sugar alcohols from the total carbohydrates.

Much like dietary fiber, with sugar alcohols the rationale is that even though they are technically carbohydrates, they have a lower energy density (calories per gram), because of their incomplete absorption and shouldn't be counted as part of total carbohydrates. This is being debated in the scientific community.

An increasing variety of polyol-containing foods is appearing on supermarket shelves. These products may have a role in weight management and in diabetic eating plans. Long-term benefits have not been established for sugar alcohols and further research is needed to document their health effects. Sugar alcohols and foods containing them should be consumed as part of an overall healthy eating plan. *Information taken from International Food Information Council Foundation Publication.*

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 515-576-2119, or E-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804 or visit the Webster County Extension web site: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/webster>.