



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
EXTENSION

Alternative Sweeteners: STEVIA

Stevia is a product made from a shrub from South America, *Stevia rebaudiana*. Other names for the leaves of this plant are Sweet Herb and Sweetleaf. Although all plant parts are intensely sweet, usually it is the leaves from which a water extract is taken to produce the sweetener.

Why is Stevia a nutritional supplement and not a “food” or food ingredient?

In order for a food ingredient to be approved for use in the United States, the company that wants to produce it must provide the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) documentation that the ingredient is safe. This includes experiments that have proven the ingredient does not cause cancer in laboratory animals, does not alter any aspect of reproduction, and does not damage any organ system, such as the kidneys or heart. When the petition to have Stevia approved as a food ingredient was reviewed by the scientists at the FDA, they did not believe that the company provided enough evidence that Stevia was safe. As a food supplement, Stevia is not supposed to be marketed as a sweetener, just as a supplement.

If Stevia is not “safe” why is it sold as a nutritional supplement?

Nutritional supplement manufacturers do not have to provide the detailed science information about their product to the FDA in order to get a product on the market. They do collect information that is voluntarily supplied about adverse effects of any supplement, but it is the responsibility of the FDA to prove a supplement is unsafe. The opposite is true of food ingredients because the food company must prove it is safe.

I’ve heard that Stevia can lower my blood glucose as well as taste sweet. Is this true?

Supplements are also not supposed to make specific health claims, and must carry the statement that any claim or suggested health benefit has not been approved by the FDA. There have only been a few studies in animals concerning the health effects of Stevia - not enough to make general recommendations about using Stevia.

As a supplement, Stevia is sold in many forms: liquid concentrate, white powdered extract, blended with maltodextrin, fresh Stevia leaves, or as dried leaf, finely powdered.

Supplements are not regulated so the amount of stevioside, the most active component, will vary. This also means the sweetness can vary within a product, among producers, and among the forms sold.