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HEALING

Stevia Rebaudiana: How Sweet It Is!

A little-known South American Medical plant is 300 times sweeter than sugar

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Stevia Rebaudiana has been growing wild in upper South America for centuries and is now cultivated in China, Japan, South Korea, Israel, Malaysia, Brazil, Paraguay, Mexico and USA. A member of the chrysanthemum family, it has been used by the Paraguay Guarani Indians since ancient times, primarily as a sweetener but also as a medicinal herb. It may seem too good to be true, but stevia is a noncaloric, nontoxic, natural sweetener that even has health benefits. The natural leaf is 200-300 times sweeter than sugar in the concentrated white powder form.

This plant's active ingredients are two glucosides, steviosides and rebaudiosides, the latter being somewhat better tasting. As a whole leaf, or liquid extraction, stevia has three major uses: flavor enhancer, herbal tea and medicinal. The common use is as sweetener and flavor enhancer. In Japan, where artificial sweeteners are banned by law, stevia has 41% of the sweetening market. Its use as an herbal tea, alone or with other herbals, is popular. Medicinally it has a beautifying effect on the skin, and benefits glucose levels in diabetics' blood--a stabilizing effect that can lower their blood sugar levels (but not in nondiabetic users). It never elevates blood sugar, allowing a diabetic to have sweets without adverse effects on his condition. Stevia also has mild antibacterial action, making it suitable for use in mouthwashes, tooth paste and cold or flu remedies--common traditional usages of the Guarini Indians. It is further used (in tea form) as an appetite

stimulant, digestive aid and in weight management. Combined with ginseng and other herbs, the tea is thought to prolong a good life. Some reports say stevia could be used as a contraceptive; however, this has not been proved. It is generally accepted that the mutagenic studies (to detect for cancerous properties) done so far were not based on valid or proven assumptions; thus there is slight question of a possible mutagenicity, as is true of the artificial sweeteners Saccharine and Aspartame. With many years of use and no evidence of toxicity or side effects, scientists do not seem to think it is necessary to do further studies.

Machinations of the US Federal Drug agency have not approved stevia for use other than as a nutritional supplement. It cannot be labeled as a sweetening agent, yet it is approved in most other countries as a safe, noncaloric sweetener. If labeled as a food supplement, it can be purchased in many pharmacies and most health food stores in the US (\$9/oz. in one shop) and is generally available in the Eastern countries and Europe. For some years, importation of the plant to the US in any form was not allowed. But this was changed recently.

Stevia is also stable in heat, allowing its use in cooking to replace sugar (one Tsp of stevia equals one cup of sugar). When used in cookies and cakes, it lacks a browning effect that sugar has, so adjustment in determining doneness must be made. There is a slightly bitter aftertaste if refined leaves are used in excess--less true with less refined leaves--and a hint of a licorice flavor (also a natural sweetener) that many desire.

It seems that personal use of stevia will be permitted in the USA; but generalized use in the food industry to replace the less than innocuous Aspartame and Saccharin seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Dr. Tandavan, 77, retired nuclear physician and hospital staff president, lives in Chicago, where he specializes in alternative healing arts. Visit his home page at the Hinduism Today Website.