

February 2014 | MindBodyGreen.com | Dr. William Cole | Health & Wellness

The Connection Between Artificial Sweeteners & Autoimmune Disease



The rise of autoimmune conditions is staggering. Millions of people around the world are suffering from unexplained symptoms from undiagnosed autoimmune problems, and even with an official diagnosis, they're given very little options in mainstream medicine.

Statistically, autoimmune diseases are the number one cause of health suffering, with two times more people suffering from autoimmune disease than heart disease.

In the past, I've explained the multifaceted causes for the autoimmune explosion. I've also described some effective tools to put autoimmune conditions into remission. Following through on the theme, I pointed to several of the most common triggers for autoimmune flare-ups.

Since writing those articles, I've received feedback asking what I thought about artificial sweeteners and autoimmune conditions. Are they safe to consume, or are they a potential trigger for autoimmune problems?

Artificial sweeteners such as saccharine (Sweet'N Low), sucralose (Splenda) or aspartame (Equal and NutraSweet) are in many diet and sugar-free drinks and foods, with one of the most popular sources of artificial sweeteners being diet sodas.

Despite years of negative press surrounding sodas in general, a 2013 report showed that the majority of adults still drink soda, and a large percentage of that consumption is of diet sodas.

In my field of study, functional medicine, we are concerned with understanding the underlying triggers and factors of health problems. While there aren't many large-scale studies on the subject of autoimmune and artificial sweeteners, let's look at what's out there:

One case study from the American Association of Clinical Endocrinology described a complete reversal of a patient with autoimmune thyroiditis (Hashimoto's) just by eliminating artificial sweeteners and diet sodas. Another study out of the Canadian Journal of Gastroenterology correlated the rise of autoimmune diseases with sweeteners and its inhibitory

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[NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with PROJECT: PFC's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.]

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One case study from the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists saw a complete reversal of a patient with autoimmune thyroiditis (Hashimoto's) just by eliminating artificial sweeteners and diet soda! Another study out of the Canadian Journal of Gastroenterology correlated the rise of irritable bowel diseases such as Crohn's and ulcerative colitis with sucralose and its inhibitory effect on beneficial gut bacteria.

Research out of the Journal of Toxicology and Environmental Health also points to sucralose's ability to weaken the microbiome. The artificial sweetener was shown to reduce the good bacteria of the microbiome by up to 50% and raise gut pH levels. This is a plausible correlation for autoimmunity, with the microbiome being 80% of the immune system!

It is important to note that there are also many different artificial sweeteners, and not all are created equally. For example, one sugar alcohol, mannitol, which is used in sugar-free gum, is being studied as an effective treatment for Parkinson's! Science, like life, is nuanced.

So What's The Verdict?

I think we need to take into account biological variability, that everyone is different, with different levels of tolerance to the foods we eat and to our environment. Some people have a genetic tolerance for a lot of stressors, some do not.

Ultimately, every food moves us closer to health or away from it, some faster than others. Clinically, seeing hundreds of autoimmune cases over the years, my experience is to err on the side of caution. In general, I've seen many patients with autoimmune conditions respond very negatively when exposed to artificial sweeteners. Sometimes we don't need research to validate our own experience and logic.

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