



## **CUTTING-EDGE CONFECTION:**

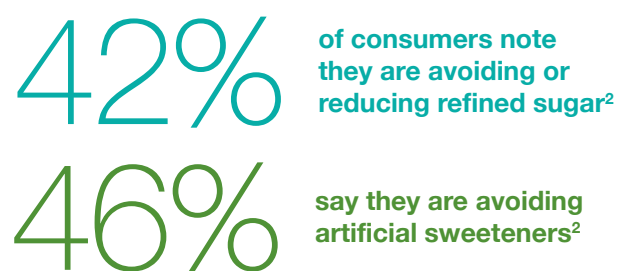
The mouthwatering world  
of better-for-you candies

Everybody needs a little TLC now and then, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. Over the past couple of years, consumers have turned to indulgent foods and beverages to provide support or an occasional boost when needed.

This has been especially true in the confectionery category. Even though consumers still note concern about sugar intake, research suggests that about one in three purchased more confectionery in early 2020 than they had in previous months.<sup>1</sup>

But as the pandemic continued, many people realized that too much indulgence might not be good over the long term, so they have sought healthier options, especially in the confection space. Now, with the help of plant-based ingredients, confectioners have a sweet opportunity to remake favorite treats – from bonbons to licorice twists – with a healthier image.

But there are no hard-and-fast rules about how to do this. When it comes to sugar and sugary treats, consumer attitudes are complicated, so it's important to understand their thinking and how it informs this evolving category. For example, consumers continue to link sugar with key concerns about health and wellness, according to data from The Hartman Group.



There may also be an aspirational factor to sugar reduction. Nearly 80% of shoppers now say they are looking for products with low-sugar or sugar-free claims, according to insights from FMCG Gurus. However, they also note that consumers exhibit a gap between attitudes and behaviors, which means they may say they are avoiding sugar, but in actuality may not be doing so as much as they think.

Underscoring this observation, a 2021 report from FONA International also noted that about half of consumers wanted to reduce their sugar consumption (an 8% increase compared to a similar survey in 2019), but just as many (54%) also said they were consuming the same amount of sugar as they did a year ago.<sup>3</sup>

Consumer attitudes are a mixed bag in other ways as well. Reduced-sugar claims, for example, are important, with more than 90% of consumers now saying they are at least a little influenced by these claims.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, taste and price are still critical, with seven in 10 consumers now saying that taste is still more important than grams of sugar per serving, and 62% noting that price also trumps grams of sugar per serving.<sup>5</sup>

It's a pretty murky picture for product formulators, so it's little wonder that strategies for better-for-you confections run the gamut – from removing sugar altogether, to applying new advances in sweetener technology.

## Tempting techniques

The good news is that there are a lot of different ways to make a confectionery product better for you, from replacing ingredients to reducing portion sizes. Many of these strategies are gaining traction in chocolate candies. Better-for-you chocolates are seeing momentum in the market, with both small, innovative brands and large chocolate makers entering the space, capitalizing on chocolate's inherent health perception.

Manufacturers are using plant-based ingredients like stevia leaf extracts to reduce total sugars as low as 0 to 3 grams, while utilizing proven experience to create products that don't compromise on taste. A blend of stevia leaf extracts or stevia-based sweeteners and erythritol (a zero-calorie bulk sweetener) can produce confections that deliver on consumer expectations for taste and texture without the bitter aftertaste that sometimes occurs with use of stevia leaf extracts alone.

These sweeteners also provide lower total sugars and a label that consumers can understand and feel good about. Some brands are also offering favorite confections in smaller portions, so consumers who long for indulgent experiences can more easily limit consumption.

A next emerging trend is creating chocolates that meet the expectations for a vegan claim using plant-based ingredients like rice syrup and sunflower kernel powder, which work synergistically to create a vegan chocolate that meets expectations for flavor, texture and color.

Adding plant-based ingredients that enrich a product with a desirable nutritional benefit is another emerging technique in better-for-you treats. Plant-based proteins from sources like peas and rice can enhance protein content in treats ranging from dairy desserts and confections to sweet bakery products and sports nutrition.<sup>6</sup>

While other candies may not have the same inherent health credentials as chocolate, many new techniques are also used in non-chocolate confections, where brands are innovating with lower-sugar versions of chews, twists and gummies that boast claims like gluten-free, vegan, and inclusion of organic ingredients.

One of the game-changing ingredients making these products possible is pectin, which has a lot going for it from both a functional and perceptual perspective. Pectin is an ingredient that occurs naturally in fruits like apples, pears, berries and citrus, and is typically extracted from apple pomace and citrus peel. It has long been used to make homemade jellies and jams, which gives it a familiar and label-friendly perception. In the confection category, pectin has become a plant-based replacement for animal-based ingredients like gelatin, which serves as a gelling or thickening agent.

Pectin does perform a little differently than gelatin, featuring a cleaner taste and less elasticity or chewiness. Pectins are also categorized into two categories, high methoxy (HM) and low methoxy (LM), which makes a difference in product application. While both can be used in confectionery products, the HM pectins require high solids (higher than 60%) and low pH (around 3.5) to form a gel. These are typical characteristics in gummies and jams, which contribute to making HM pectin an ideal gelling agent to enhance texture and gelation in confectionery applications.





HM pectins also have a higher degree of esterification (DE). Based on their DE, pectins are classified as slow-set, rapid-set or medium-rapid-set. This means that pectins will exhibit different gelling speeds and dynamics in relation to the level of solids and acid present in a recipe. For this reason, slow-set pectins are preferred in high-solids applications such as confectionery, since they will allow for a controlled gel formation while avoiding obstructions in equipment used for gummy manufacturing.

That said, LM pectin can sometimes be a better solution for products with higher pH, like milk or caramel-flavored gummies.

Once brands get the taste and texture right, there are big opportunities for innovation in confectionery. Beyond creating smaller, individual portions, product formulators are working outside the box with new flavor combinations in a single treat, or creating new versions of old favorites, like a chocolate cup featuring almond or cashew nut butter.

It is clearly an exciting time for the confectionery space, with opportunities to create new treats that meet changing consumer demands and balance the desire for indulgence with nutritious, great-tasting products.

**Unwrap new opportunities in the better-for-you confectionery space.**  
Learn more at [cargill.com/labelfriendly](https://cargill.com/labelfriendly).

## References

<sup>1</sup> FMCG Gurus. "Confectionery Consumption within the USA." October 22, 2020.

<https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-confectionery-consumption-within-the-usa/>

<sup>2</sup> The Hartman Group. "How Sweet It Is: Our Complex Relationship with Sugar and Sweeteners." November 11, 2021.

<https://www.hartman-group.com/infographics/916732951/how-sweet-it-is-our-complex-relationship-with-sugar-and-sweeteners>

<sup>3</sup> FONA International. "Sugar: The Voice of the Consumer." June 11, 2021. <https://www.fona.com/0621sugarreduction/>

<sup>5</sup> Innova Market Insights. "Cutting Sugar and Boosting Protein in Better-for-You Sweet Treats." February 24, 2021.

<https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/cutting-sugar-and-boosting-protein-in-better-for-you-sweet-treats/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. FONA International.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Innova Market Insights.

*Claims: The labeling, substantiation and decision making of all claims for your products is your responsibility. We recommend you consult regulatory and legal advisors familiar with all applicable laws, rules and regulations prior to making labeling and claims decisions.*