



Subtleties in sugar reduction

New attitudes and strategies in reduced-sugar products

The idea of indulging in a sweet confection, or simply eating less healthfully, became common practice for many consumers in 2020 as they dealt with the stresses of a global pandemic – like working from home and coping with kids learning online. If they felt like they deserved an indulgence, they were right.

But things are starting to look a bit different in 2022. Readjusting to a new post-COVID world, consumers are trying to get back to some normalcy. Concerns about sugars in the diet (which never really went away) now seem to be ramping back up. And consumers today are becoming more educated about the impacts of diet on health and the ingredients in the products they purchase.

So the war on sugar is far from over... and emerging research will keep sugar reduction in the news. For example, a recent study from Massachusetts General Hospital, Tufts University, Harvard and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene provided some stark statistics. The research team said that cutting 20% of sugar from packaged foods and 40% from beverages could prevent 2.48 million cardiovascular disease events, 490,000 cardiovascular deaths and 750,000 cases of diabetes over the lifetime of an adult population.¹ The research team is proposing a new national policy that would require government support as companies work toward a national sugar reformulation policy.

Whether the policy moves forward or not, sugar reduction remains a complex issue for consumers who often show large gaps between their aspirations to reduce sugar and how much they actually do so. Consumers have been noting a desire to limit sugar for several years, according to ongoing research from the International Food Information Council (IFIC), but CDC data still points to sugar intake that is well above the recommended amount and rising incidence of diet-related health concerns.² Though consumers may say they want to reduce sugar in their diets, they still want products to taste good. What's more, many are often confused about the healthfulness of sweetener ingredients and sometimes perceive low/no-calorie sweeteners as unhealthy while viewing more natural caloric sugars as the better choice.³

These behavior gaps and misconceptions leave product formulators in a tough spot. With demand for healthier products on the rise, they must prioritize reducing sugar in their formulations, while also innovating with ingredients that meet consumer taste expectations... and then engage them with new marketing strategies to address these attitudinal disparities.

Consumer recalibration

According to recent data from FMCG Gurus, about 60% of consumers noted purchasing more comfort foods at the peak of the pandemic.⁴ The report suggests that this habit might have helped address their stress levels, but many people are now looking at a few extra pounds post-pandemic... which they're looking to change:



say they plan to eat and drink more healthfully in the coming year



of these respondents say they will do so by reducing sugar intake

Source: FMCG Gurus: "Redesigning Sugar in 2021: September 3, 2021."

Consumers still consistently link sugar calories as the most likely source of weight gain, according to the annual study on food and health trends from IFIC.⁵ But they are also beginning to connect high-sugar diets with other health issues. Data from Innova's 2020 Global Health and Nutrition Survey found that the leading reason respondents said they now seek to reduce sugar is the prevention of health conditions, which came in ahead of weight management and dental health.⁶

FMCG analysts suggest that consumers are becoming more conscious of health problems related to sugar; they now also believe that sugar can have a direct impact on their immune function, as well as sleep patterns.⁷

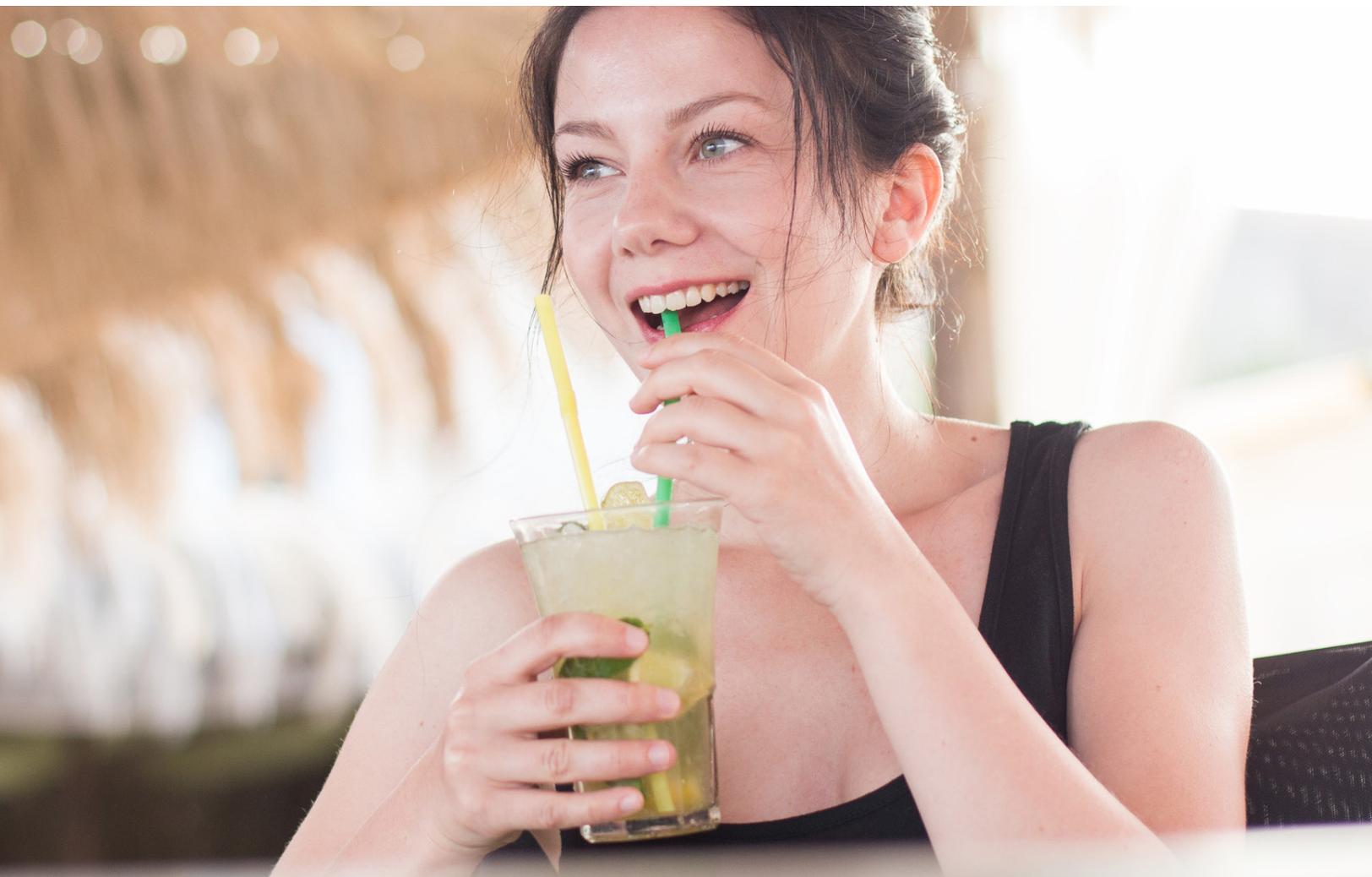
Solid solutions

While consumers are clearly looking at products' sugar content, this is not the only deciding factor in purchase. A product's taste, convenience and value equation are all still important. Recent innovations have provided several alternative sweeteners that are useful in replacing sugar's many functions, such as sweetness, texture and browning, while delivering a lower caloric value as well as a label-friendly perception.

A case in point is zero-calorie sweeteners made from natural sources such as stevia and monk fruit. These ingredients have become some of the most popular options for consumers,⁸ and are showing up in new reduced-sugar products in part because they contain fewer or no calories. Early iterations of ingredients were

known to leave a bitter aftertaste, but new innovations have addressed this taste issue – especially with the next-generation stevia ingredients Rebaudioside M (Reb M) and Rebaudioside D (Reb D), the sweetest components of the stevia leaf – making them a versatile option in many product applications.

Also generally perceived as natural, these ingredients can provide a strong solution as consumers seek products with ingredients they perceive to be label-friendly and sustainable. A new production method using fermentation to create Reb M and Reb D is helping to produce these ingredients at commercial scale while minimizing their environmental impact. A recent review of the production processes for Cargill's EverSweet® stevia sweetener showed that when compared to bioconverted Reb M, it required 70% less land, produced a 60% lower carbon footprint and created a 60% lower ecological footprint, which includes the impact to ecosystems, an improvement to land biodiversity and a reduction in the need for additional water for irrigation.⁹



Sugar alcohols are another example of sweetener solutions that are gaining traction. Some of the more commonly used sugar alcohols include erythritol, xylitol, maltitol and isomaltose. These solutions have also become useful in blends with high-intensity sweeteners like stevia to help replicate the sweet taste of sugar.

Whichever alternative natural sweetener formulators turn to, brands have an opportunity to create reduced-sugar products that not only taste better, but also are not perceived as a sacrifice, according to the FMCG Gurus analysts.¹⁰ Positioning these products as fun and inspirational will be a solid strategy looking ahead.

It is also important to be completely transparent about ingredients used in products with a better-for-you positioning. While consumers are more aware of natural sweeteners than ever, there may still be a lingering disconnect between this category and the specific ingredients meeting that definition.¹¹

Helping to educate consumers with clear and transparent product labeling, an engaging story about where the sweeteners come from and how they're made is an additional opportunity for innovation that is sure to pay off.

Deliciously sweet taste makes choosing less sugar easier.
Learn more at cargill.com/sugarreduction.



¹ Slomski, A. "Cut Sugar to Save Lives: Study Examines Proposal Targeting Packaged Foods, Beverages." Harvard Medical School. MGH News and Public Affairs. September 2, 2021.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Get the Facts: Added Sugars." <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/data-statistics/added-sugars.html>

³ International Food Information Council (IFIC). "Perceptions and Use of Dietary Sweeteners in 2021." May 2021. <https://foodinsight.org/perceptions-and-use-of-dietary-sweeteners/>

⁴ FMCG Gurus: "Redesigning Sugar in 2021." FMCG blog. September 3, 2021. <https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-redesigning-sugar-in-2021/>

⁵ International Food Information Council (IFIC). 2021 Food and Health Survey. May 19, 2021. <https://foodinsight.org/2021-food-health-survey/>

⁶ Innova Market Insights. "Naturally Sweeter Approach to Reducing Sugar in Food and Beverages." August 12, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/naturally-sweeter-approach-to-reducing-sugar-in-food-and-beverages/>

⁷ FMCG Gurus. "Consumers are Monitoring their Sugar Intake in 2021." FMCG Gurus blog. January 5, 2021. <https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-consumers-are-monitoring-their-sugar-intake-in-2021/>

⁸ Ibid. IFIC. Perceptions and Use.

⁹ "Lifecycle Analysis Finds Cargill's EverSweet® Stevia Sweetener Proves to be Sweeter to the Earth than other Stevia Options." Cargill Press Release. May 24, 2021. <https://www.cargill.com/2020/life-cycle-analysis>

¹⁰ Ibid. FMCG Gurus. "Consumers Monitoring Sugar Intake."

¹¹ FMCG Gurus. "Sugar Reduction." FMCG Gurus blog. December 12, 2021. <https://fmcggurus.com/blog/sugar-reduction/>