

Sweet somethings

Stevia is popular for cooking, baking and is already an ingredient in thousands of products over the world. Available in health food stores and supermarkets in liquid, powder, granule and tablet forms, stevia can be added to food in much the same way you would add sugar. But you won't need much! Stevia extract can be up to 200 times sweeter than sugar. There's good news for calorie counters too. Unlike agave, honey, maple syrup and other popular natural sweeteners, stevia contains zero calories and, of course, no sugar, whereas one teaspoon of table sugar contains 16 calories.



Is stevia right for you?

If you're looking for sugar alternatives to help with weight loss, managing blood sugar or for better health, stevia may be your new best friend. To find out if it's right for you, try it and see how your body responds.

While stevia is calorie-free and well-suited to sweetening smoothies, soft drinks, hot drinks, yoghurt and creamy desserts, it's not the perfect substitute for sugar in some recipes as it doesn't offer all the same functions as sugar when heated or combined with other ingredients. Many a creative cook has had fun reinventing their favourite treats, however, and currently there's lots of development and innovation on stevia to make it taste as similar to sugar as possible.

In New Zealand, there are many pre-prepared foods and drinks containing stevia readily available, and people in more than 75 countries around the world use stevia sweeteners in their food and drinks – so it's fair to say people like the taste!

Sponsored by Coca-Cola.

Naturally sweet

Stevia has become the sweetener on everyone's lips – but why?

What is stevia?

The stevia plant is a relative of the chrysanthemum family (think also daisies and marigolds). Its leaves offer a sweetness 200 times sweeter than sugar – without any calories. While it may be unfamiliar to many of us, stevia has been harvested and used in recipes by indigenous people for more than 1500 years. The native peoples of Brazil and Paraguay called it *ka'a he'ê*, the "sweet herb", and used it in yerba mate tea, medicines and sweet treats.

A fine crop

Grown in South America and Asia, there are about 200 species of the stevia plant, with *Stevia rebaudiana* being the most sought-after variety. Its leaves contain compounds that provide the sweet taste humans love, with the bonus that it doesn't cause tooth decay!

Since stevia requires less water, energy and land than farming other kinds of sweetener crops, it doesn't compromise farmers' staple food crops such as cassava, beans or maize. Instead, it provides local primary producers with additional income and supports their traditional farming practices.

