

Stevia: a natural opportunity to help reduce added sugars in food and beverage

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Introduction

The plant *Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni is native to South America and its leaves have been used by natives for sweetening purposes for centuries¹. Responsible for the sweet taste is a group of different types of steviol glycosides (SG), which naturally occur in the leaves of *Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni². Stevioside and rebaudioside A (Reb A) are the most abundant SG types³. SG can be extracted from stevia leaves and are 200-300 times sweeter than sucrose⁴, whereby Reb A reaches highest degrees of sweetness and the most pleasant taste⁵. SG are discussed on a global basis as the "holy grail" of sweeteners^{6,7} and seem on the edge of becoming mainstream⁸. Many countries, most recently including EU Member States, already have SG on their market while others are still reluctant. Scientist expert panels such as JECFA⁹ and EFSA¹⁰ gave positive opinions in rigorous safety assessments. Scientists are interested in the many potential health benefits related to SG consumption. From the consumer perspective, SG offer a unique combination of must-have characteristics such as "natural" or "zero calories", making them a preferable alternative to sugar and artificial high potency sweeteners. Regarding the obesity and diabetes epidemic demands of low-caloric sugar replacers are rising. Many of the global players in food industry already successfully entered stevia business.