[ASK EATINGWELL]

SWEET NEWS ABOUT STEVIA

I've noticed new "natural," no-calorie sweeteners at the store. Are they safe?

—Julianna DiDonato, Harrison, NY

This year, a few noncaloric sweeteners made from an extract of the *Stevia rebaudiana* plant arrived on grocery-store shelves. The stevia plant has a long history of use as a sweetener in South America. These new sweeteners—sold under brand names like Truvia and PureVia—include a highly purified extract of stevia called Rebaudioside A (a.k.a. Rebiana or Reb A). Reb A is 200 times sweeter than sugar and does not raise blood sugar.

Until December 2008, stevia and its derivatives could be sold in the U.S. only as dietary supplements, due to safety concerns. In the 1980s, animal studies linked stevia with adverse effects on fertility and reproductive development and possible genetic mutations. But in 2008, the makers of Truvia and PureVia submitted research to the Food and Drug Administration regarding Reb A's safety and petitioned for it to become a generally regarded as safe (GRAS) ingredient.

The FDA affirmed the GRAS status, but did not change the previous ruling on stevia. "Reb A is different than whole-leaf stevia or [other] stevia extracts, which can only be sold as dietary supplements," says FDA spokesperson Michael Herndon. "Nobody has provided the FDA with evidence that whole-leaf stevia is safe."

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a consumer advocacy group, believes that the Reb A's GRAS status was granted prematurely. "In the past, FDA protocol required repeated testing in two separate animal species prior to approval, but in this case it didn't," says David Schardt, nutrition expert with CSPI. "We are not warning people to avoid Reb A, but the public should be aware that the FDA did not follow all the usual safeguards."

BOTTOM LINE: The FDA considers Reb A a safe sugar substitute, but has not approved other forms of stevia. If you want to use stevia, we suggest sticking with Reb A (look for it on the ingredient label). *—Sylvia Geiger, M.S., R.D.*

[FOOD IQ]

HAVE YOUR NUTRIENTS EXPIRED?

Green tea: 6 months

Orange juice: 1 week

Olive oil: 6 months

Honey: 6 months

Sometimes there are clues when a food passes its prime: lettuce wilts, bananas turn brown. Other foods will look and smell OK long after their health punch has dramatically declined. "Certain nutrients are unstable when exposed to oxygen (from the air), heat (from cooking) and light," says Carol Johnston, Ph.D., R.D., chair of the Department of Nutrition at Arizona State University. Keep track of how long you store the following nutrient-rich foods. *—Amy Paturel*

GREEN TEA: A 2009 study in the *Journal of Food Science* showed that catechins (antioxidants linked with a reduced risk of some cancers) in green tea decreased markedly over time. After six months, catechin levels were 32 percent lower. Make the most of the antioxidants by storing tea in a sealed container in a dark, cool place.

ORANGE JUICE: One cup of OJ can offer a full day's dose of vitamin C. But, "OJ that has been opened loses all antioxidant benefit after just one week," says Johnston. To get the most vitamin C, buy frozen concentrate and drink within a few days. Frozen concentrate is exposed to less light and air.

OLIVE OIL: Extra-virgin olive oil contains more than 45 heart-healthy antioxidants, but after six months of storage their potency decreases by about 40 percent, according to researchers at the University of Foggia in Italy. Why? Oxygen bubbles in the bottle destroy the antioxidants.

HONEY: Researchers at the University of Illinois found the antioxidant power of clover and buckwheat honey decreased by 30 to 50 percent after six months. Consider buying buckwheat—it generally has more antioxidants to start with.

[FRESH FINDINGS]

A NATURAL SOLUTION FOR HOT FLASHES

Feeling hot, hot, hot? If menopause is the cause, omega-3 fats may help, suggests a new study in the journal *Menopause*. Researchers gave a group of menopausal women capsules containing EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid)—the omega-3 fats found in fish. A second group got capsules of sunflower oil (no omega-3s). After eight weeks, only those in the omega-3s group reported fewer hot flashes. Scientists aren't sure *how* the omega-3s might reduce hot flashes (or even what causes hot flashes in the first place). They think that omega-3s may assist in the production of neurotransmitters that help the body to maintain an even temperature. The findings are preliminary, and you'd need to eat five servings of fatty fish a week to match the dose in the study. If you'd like to pursue omega-3 supplements as a natural solution for soothing hot flashes, talk with your doctor. *—Ana Mantica*

For more on sweeteners, check out our buyer's guide to sugar substitutes at **eatingwell.com/sweeteners.** <<