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RNUTR (PUBLIC HEALTH) - WRITTEN EVIDENCE (FDO0055)**

Re: #8 The role of the food and drink industry in driving food and diet trends and on the policymaking process.

Government should encourage reformulation of products to reduce sugar content of foods, especially those sold to children. Reformulation using the natural sweetener, Stevia, should be encouraged.

I attach some review papers. Here are some quick facts:

1. Stevia is a non-nutritive or zero-calorie natural sweetener derived from the leaves of the *Stevia rebaudiana* plant, a herb native to South America.
2. The sweet compounds in stevia, called steviol glycosides, are extracted and refined from the stevia plant leaves. These steviol glycosides are 200-350 times sweeter than regular sugar.
3. Stevia sweeteners can be used as a sugar substitute in a variety of food and beverage products, such as sodas, juices, dairy products, baked goods, and tabletop sweeteners.
4. Stevia is metabolised differently than sugar, as the steviol glycosides are not absorbed in the upper gastrointestinal tract and are instead fermented by gut microbes.
5. Like other artificial sweeteners, there is a growing body of evidence from randomised controlled trials that stevia sweetened foods and drinks can help weight reduction.
6. Potential side effects of stevia consumption include gastrointestinal symptoms, low blood pressure, and potential endocrine disruption, though the evidence is limited and inconclusive.

7. Stevia is considered safe for consumption. In the EU, steviol glycosides extracted from the stevia plant are approved as a food additive and can be used as a sweetener in a variety of food and beverage products. The use of steviol glycosides is regulated under the EU's Novel Food Regulation. Only highly purified steviol glycosides (>95% purity) are approved for use, not the whole stevia leaf or crude stevia extracts.
8. EFSA has established an Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) for steviol glycosides of up to 4 mg per kg of body weight per day. Dietary exposure assessments have shown that EU consumers do not have a high risk of exceeding this ADI. The EU's food safety authorities have deemed stevia sweeteners safe for use based on extensive scientific evaluation and ongoing monitoring.
9. In summary, stevia is a safe and effective, natural, zero-calorie sweetener derived from the stevia plant that can be used as a sugar substitute.
10. In a world where natural additives are preferred over those which are artificial, reformulation of products using Stevia offers many opportunities.

Further reading

Ashwell M, Gibson S, Bellisle F *et al.* (2020) Expert consensus on low-calorie sweeteners: facts, research gaps and suggested actions. *Nutr Res Rev* **33**, 145-154.

Ashwell M (2015) Stevia, Nature's Zero-Calorie Sustainable Sweetener: A New Player in the Fight Against Obesity. *Nutr Today* **50**, 129-134.

Ashwell M (2011) Tackling the obesity problem –focusing on shape, not weight, and the use of stevia, a natural origin sweetener. *Dietetics Today* **December**.

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