



HEALTH WISE

Are sugar alternatives sweet nothings? By **Paula Goodyer**.

Stevia, agave nectar, maple syrup, rice syrup, rapadura — trawl the shelves of supermarkets and health food stores and there are plenty of sweet alternatives to basic cane sugar — and even that's had a makeover with CSR's launch of a low GI sugar, Logicane, designed to help keep blood glucose levels more even.

But whether these products offer real benefits compared to regular sugar depends on what you want from a sweetener — is it zero kilojoules, steadier blood sugar or a food that's less refined and with more nutrients?

"If you're trying to lose weight, stevia's selling point is that it's both kilojoule-free and natural too," says dietitian Catherine Saxelby, author of *Nutrition for Life*. "But although you can use it to sweeten drinks and yoghurt, you can't bake with it."

The fact that stevia isn't synthetic, but extracted from the leaves of a South American plant, sets it apart from

artificial sweeteners such as aspartame which — although cleared for use in Australia and the US — is still dogged by internet rumours linking it to health risks, Saxelby explains.

Now approved by Food Standards Australia New Zealand for use as a sweetener in the food industry, the slightly bitter-tasting stevia is available in health food stores as a powder, a liquid extract or as tablets to add to tea or coffee. But whether or not it helps unload kilos is anyone's guess — some research suggests that because the body is programmed to expect plenty of kilojoules from sweet-tasting foods, it's left unsatisfied by zero kilojoule sweeteners and keeps on seeking out sweet foods to make up for the missing calories.

But if you want some nutrients with your sweetness, a new study from the University of Oslo has found that some alternative sweeteners, usually the kind you'll find in health food stores,

do contain some antioxidants — blackstrap molasses and date sugar, followed by barley malt sugar and brown rice malt syrup had the highest antioxidant value, says Saxelby, followed by brown sugar, honey and maple syrup.

Meanwhile, the low GI sugar Logicane won't make you any thinner because its kilojoule content is similar to table sugar — about 68 kilojoules per level teaspoon — but its low GI (Glycemic Index) rating means that it can help keep levels of blood glucose even — good for anyone with diabetes or insulin resistance. But it's not a licence to eat unlimited low GI sugar — too much could still raise blood glucose levels in people with diabetes, according to Dr Alan Barclay of the Glycemic Index Foundation.

Other low GI sweeteners include 100 per cent maple syrup — not to be confused with the cheaper maple-flavoured syrup, and some of the floral honeys such as yellowbox and ironwood. Agave nectar, a Mexican cactus extract, also has a low GI, but, although it's often hyped as a source of nutrients too, the University of Oslo research rated it as no healthier than white sugar.

But is it worth swapping to an

alternative sweetener, especially when they're often dearer than raw sugar — such as organic maple syrup at \$13 or more for 250ml, or stevia at \$8.70 for 50g?

"For anyone with diabetes, Logicane is the obvious choice. But for the rest of us I think the advantages of the alternatives are fairly marginal," says Saxelby, pointing out that it's not so much the sugar that we add to food ourselves that's the problem. About 75

per cent of the sugar we eat comes from ready-made and processed foods, many of which, such as doughnuts, cakes, chocolate and fancy ice-creams, also come bundled with saturated fat and trans fat, she says.

"Soft drink is a big one — unlike a teaspoon of sugar on porridge or jam on wholegrain bread, which make healthy low GI foods taste good, soft drinks are just dumping a load of kilojoules in your system without any other nutrients."

