

So Many Treats Without Sugar!

Brenda Davis, RD

Kids love sugar and their sweet tooth is greatly encouraged by the candy culture we are now immersed in. Sweet treats are everywhere – at stores, in schools, at fairs, birthday parties, and other celebrations. It all adds up to far too much sugar. American kids average about 20 teaspoons of sugar per day! The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends that children ages 2 to 18 years limit added sugars to less than 6 teaspoons per day. They add that children should drink no more than 8 ounces of sugary beverages per week. According to AHA, children under 2 should not consume any foods or beverages with added sugars. You might be shocked to learn that a 12 ounce can of soda contains about 10 teaspoons of sugar and a cup of low-fat fruit-flavored yogurt contains about 9-11 teaspoons of sugar.



Sugar itself is not inherently harmful. Sugar (or glucose) is the preferred fuel for the human body, and we are well equipped to handle it when it is naturally present in the matrix of a whole food such as an apple or an orange. It is “added sugars” that are the issue. Nearly half of the sugar in American diets comes from sweet beverages such as soda, energy drinks, and sports beverages. Intake of added sugars is linked to weight gain, obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. In children, sugar consumption, especially from sugar-sweetened beverages, has been reported to adversely impact cognition, and promote dental caries.

The goal is not to forbid sweet treats, but rather to enjoy sweet treats (in moderation) that derive their sweetness from whole foods. This article is all about making delicious treats without a single cube of sugar!

Here are my top 5 tips on reducing reliance on refined or concentrated sweeteners.

1. **Rewire your taste buds.** Train your taste buds to appreciate less intense sweetness by gradually reducing the sweeteners used in foods and beverages.
2. **Minimize beverages with added sugars.** Instead of soda and other sweet beverages, stick with water. For a fizzy drink, try soda water with lemon, lime, fruit, or a splash of antioxidant-rich juice such as blueberry or pomegranate.
3. **Think outside the box.** Sugar is a major component of many processed foods (in addition to all the familiar terms for sugar, words ending in “ose” are also added sugars). Reducing these foods will naturally reduce intake of added sugars. When you purchase prepared foods, select unsweetened or

“no added sugar” products, such as non-dairy milks, applesauce, nut butters, oatmeal, and canned fruit.

4. **Cook at home.** When you cook at home, you are in control of the amount and types of sugars added. In baking, use fresh or dried fruits in place of sugar when possible. Use vanilla bean or vanilla extract, citrus zest, or spices like allspice, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and star anise to bring out the natural sweetness in foods. Making foods from scratch provides a wonderful opportunity to create marvelous memories with kids in the kitchen.
5. **Make fruit your go-to sweet treat.** Fruit is a nutritious, convenient sweet treat. To increase intake among children, teens, and adults alike, slice fruit on a plate and dish it up as a snack or dessert.



The recipes below are delicious treats without any added sugars – one is a simple banana-oat cookie and the other is a more gourmet layered unbaked brownie. They are fun to make and even more fun to eat!

Banana Walnut Cookies

Makes 24 cookies

These cookies are a guilt-free treat for kids. They freeze beautifully and are delicious straight from the freezer! You can get quite creative with them adding different dried fruits, nuts, seeds, coconut, or chocolate chips.

Ingredients

1 large ripe banana (or 2 small bananas)
3/4 cup dates, packed
¼ cup water
1/3 cup nut butter
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 teaspoon cinnamon
½ teaspoon salt
1/3 cup ground flax
1 cup oats
1 cup walnuts or pecans, chopped

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees F.
2. Cook dates with water over low heat until dates are very soft. Mash dates.
3. Mash banana in a medium-sized bowl.
4. Add dates, nut butter, vanilla, cinnamon, and salt. Stir until thoroughly combined.
5. Stir in flax, oats, and walnuts.
6. Drop by heaping tablespoon on cookie sheets lined with a silicone mat or parchment paper (or spray cookie sheet with oil).

7. Use a fork to flatten cookies (dip in water to prevent sticking).
8. Bake for about 20-25 minutes or until nicely browned.
9. Cool and store in the refrigerator or freezer.

Variations:

1. Add 1/3 cup coconut.
2. Add 1/3 cup raisins, currents, or chopped apricots.
3. Add ½ cup chocolate chips.
4. Replace flaxseeds with chia seeds.
5. Add 2 tablespoons sesame seeds.
6. Add 1/3 cup sunflower seeds.



Decadent Unbaked Caramel Brownies

These unbaked brownies are truly a treat. They are very rich, so a small piece is plenty! Salt is optional, but it does add a greater depth of flavor. If you like coconut you can replace up to 1 cup of nuts for coconut.

Base:

2 cups walnuts, pecans, or a combination of nuts (e.g., walnuts and hazelnuts)
1/3 cup cocoa powder
1 1/2 cups pitted soft dates, packed (steam if hard)
3 tablespoons nut butter
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/3 teaspoon salt (optional)

Caramel

1.5 cups (packed) soft, pitted dates (steam if hard)
¾ cup nut butter (cashew or mixed nut butters work well)
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/3 teaspoon salt (optional)

Frosting:

150 g dark chocolate
¼ cup nut butter (cashew, almond, peanut, etc.)

Directions

Prepare Base

1. Process walnuts, hazelnuts, cocoa powder, dates, nut butter, vanilla, and salt to form a sticky dough.
2. Press base into a 9 x 9 pan.

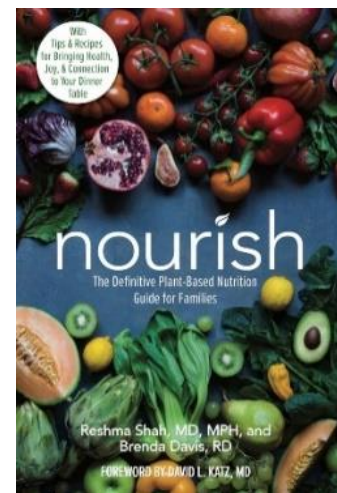
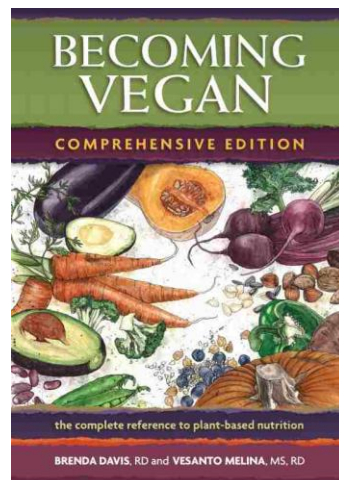
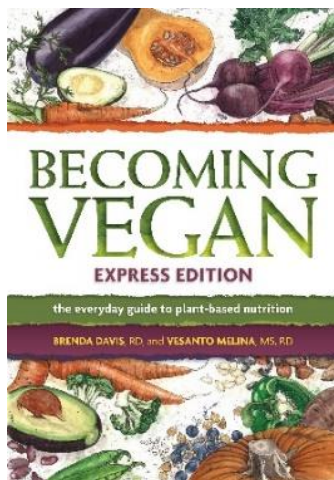
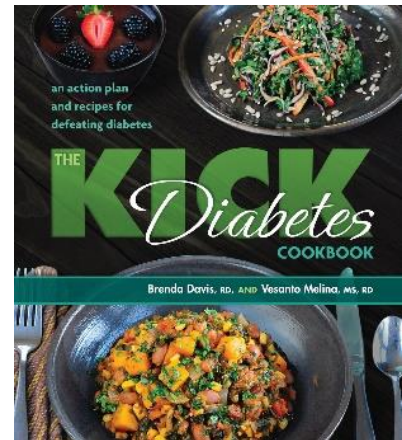
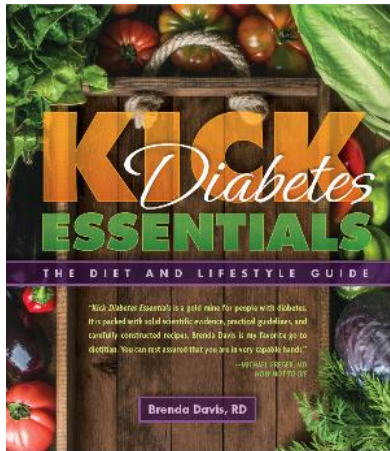
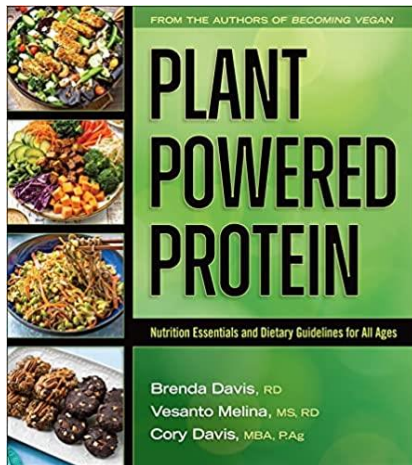
Prepare Caramel

1. Place dates, nut butter, vanilla, and salt in a food processor and process until smooth and creamy (consistency of thick caramel).
2. Spread caramel evenly on top of base.

Prepare Frosting

1. Place chocolate in a small pot and cook over low heat until chocolate is melted. Stir in nut butter. Spread evenly over the caramel.
2. Slice brownies and store in the refrigerator or freezer.
3. If you like, you can sprinkle the frosting with chopped nuts or decorate with pecan halves.





This article was originally written for So Many Cooks in the Kitchen.

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