

Clinical Insights



Stevia, FDA & Freedom Information Act

While the American public has waited in vain for a safe artificial sweetener to be developed, citizens of certain other countries have for years -- in some cases, for centuries -- enjoyed a safe, natural sweetener that is virtually calorie-free and to which many other health benefits have been attributed. This miracle sweetener is a South American herb called *Stevia rebaudiana* Bertoni -- commonly known simply as Stevia, estimated to be some 150 to 400 times sweeter than sugar.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration since the mid-1980s has labeled Stevia an "unsafe food additive" and gone to extensive lengths to keep it off the U.S. market -- including initiating a search-and-seizure campaign and full-fledged "import alert."

To judge from the extensive measures the FDA has employed to keep Americans in the dark about Stevia, one might assume it was some type of dangerous narcotic. But, in fact, no ill effects have ever been attributed to it, although it has been used by millions of people around the world, in some locales for hundreds of years.

So adamant has the FDA remained on the subject, that even though Stevia can now be legally marketed as a dietary supplement under legislation enacted in 1994, any mention of its possible use as a sweetener or tea is still strictly prohibited.

Now that Stevia has been designated as "unsafe" -- almost certainly to benefit the politically powerful sweetener industry -- the agency has insisted on stonewalling any and all evidence to the contrary. Once the FDA makes a decision, neither practical experience nor scientific research is likely to bring about a reversal of its position..

As Rob McCaleb, president and founder of the Herb Research Foundation, puts it: "Sweetness is big money. Nobody wants to see something cheap and easy to grow on the market competing with the things they worked so hard to get approved."

Copies of the documents referred to on these pages should be available to anyone who wishes to make a Freedom of Information Act request to the FDA. For more information on making a FOIA request, check out the FDA Web site at: www.fda.gov