Diets and treatments for hypoglycemia (low blood sugar)

Dear Alice,

I need general information on hypoglycemia and about diets and treatments.

Sincerely,

Not So Sweet

Answer

Dear Not So Sweet,

You're probably sweeter than you think! Hypoglycemia is the medical name for an unusually low blood sugar (a.k.a., glucose) level. Excess insulin, along with glucose deficiency, usually causes hypoglycemia. Glucose is vital for health because it provides energy for the brain, central nervous system, and all of the body's cells. If a person is unable to maintain adequate blood glucose levels, major organs such as the brain, are deprived of the fuel they need. When someone has low blood sugar, they may experience:

- Heart palpitations
- Fatigue
- Pale skin
- Shakiness
- Anxiety
- Sweating
- Hunger
- Irritability
- Tingling sensation around the mouth
- Crying out during sleep

Over time, it's possible to experience more severe symptoms as hypoglycemia worsens. Symptoms could include:

- Confusion, abnormal behavior or both, such as the inability to complete routine tasks
- Visual disturbances, such as blurred vision
- Seizures
- Loss of consciousness
Hypoglycemia may be caused by several factors. One cause is type I diabetes. Type I diabetes is a chronic disease that impairs a person's ability to produce an adequate amount of insulin to control glucose levels. Insulin must be injected and hypoglycemic drugs can be taken in order to lower the glucose level in the body. Other causes include certain medications, excessive alcohol consumption, illnesses affecting the liver (such as hepatitis), an overproduction of insulin, and hormone deficiencies.

Treatment of hypoglycemia may involve treating any underlying causes, monitoring blood sugar levels, and consuming glucose tablets or simple carbohydrates to manage immediate symptoms. Determining how much food is needed to raise blood sugar levels depends on how low the blood sugar level has become. For example, if someone's blood sugar level is at 51 to 70 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL), it's recommended that they eat 10 to 15 grams of simple carbohydrate (e.g., half a cup of fruit juice or three to four glucose tablets). Whereas, if their blood sugar level is less than 50 mg/dL, it's recommended that they eat 20 to 30 grams of simple carbohydrates.

When it comes to changing or altering diets to address hypoglycemia, there are some general guidelines to follow. However, individual needs can vary and it's good for diets to be tailored to each individual's nutritional requirements. A registered dietician can help determine an appropriate and specific eating plan for those dealing with this condition. Additionally, these dietary tips may help manage hypoglycemia:

- Eat small frequent meals throughout the day, which can help stabilize blood glucose levels.
- Eat fewer simple sugars (e.g., candy, sweets, sugar, and honey) and more complex carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates are found in foods such as bread, cereals, pasta, rice, vegetables, and legumes (beans and peas). The body's primary source of glucose comes from the breakdown of carbohydrates.
- Choose fresh fruits as opposed to dried fruits, canned fruits, and juices.
- Avoid alcohol, and limit coffee, tea, colas, chocolate, and cocoa.
- Maintain a healthy body weight by consuming a balanced diet and getting adequate physical activity.

If you have been experiencing signs and symptoms, and you believe you may have hypoglycemia, it's advisable to visit a health care provider. That way, you can be correctly diagnosed and receive any needed treatment. For more information about hypoglycemia or low blood sugar, check out the related questions.

Enjoy the sweet life!

Alice!

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Related questions
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Resources

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Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
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