Dear Alice,

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

Sincerely,

Not So Sweet

Answer

Dear Not So Sweet,

Oh, you’re probably sweeter than you think?. Hypoglycemia is the medical name for low blood sugar. Excess insulin, along with glucose deficiency, usually causes hypoglycemia. We need glucose because it provides energy for our brain, central nervous system, and all of our body's cells. If someone 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, s/he may experience sweating, weakness, hunger, dizziness, trembling, headache, palpations (thumping in the chest), confusion and altered mental status, blurred vision, irrational behavior and aggressiveness, moodiness, and uncoordinated movements. S/he can appear to be intoxicated and have an increased heart rate. S/he may also have cool, moist skin and may even have a seizure. Over time, a hypoglycemic individual can experience allergies, sleeplessness, anxiety, depression, and is more predisposed to weight gain. S/he can also have recurrent headaches, poor memory, lack of confidence, and reduced libido.

Hypoglycemia may be caused by several factors. One cause is type I diabetes, also known as juvenile or insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (IDDM). Type I diabetes is a chronic disease that impairs a person's ability to produce an adequate amount of insulin to control glucose levels (check out the diabetes-related questions below). Insulin must be injected and hypoglycemic drugs can be taken in order to lower the glucose level in the body. Other causes include too much medication, not eating enough carbohydrates, skipping meals, not eating soon enough, and too much exercise. Excessive alcohol consumption and insomnia have also been found to be causes of a low glucose level in the body.

A person with hypoglycemia can benefit from changing some of her/his behaviors:
Instead of three large meals a day, have six small meals, which can help stabilize blood glucose levels throughout the day.

Eat fewer simple sugars (i.e., candy, sweets, sugar, 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.

Eat more fiber.

Choose fresh fruits as opposed to canned fruits and juices.

At each meal, consume foods high in protein, such as fish, poultry, meats, and dairy products, such as low- or non-fat milk and cheese.

Avoid alcohol, and limit coffee, tea, colas, chocolate, and cocoa.

Maintain a healthy body weight by consuming a healthy diet and engaging in adequate exercise.

In case carbohydrate supplies run low, protein can be broken down to supply glucose for the body to use. This process, known as gluconeogenesis, is more likely to be a last resort for a person since proteins are needed for other body processes, such as tissue repair. Gluconeogenesis is also more frequently associated with fasting or starving.

If you have been experiencing signs and symptoms of hypoglycemia, and you believe you may have hypoglycemia, it's advisable to visit a health care provider so that you can be correctly diagnosed and receive any needed treatment.

For more information about hypoglycemia or low blood sugar, check out the related questions below. Enjoy the sweet life!

Alice!

Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [2]
Food Choices & Health [3]

Related questions

Diabetes mellitus [5]
Which are better: Desserts high in fat or in sugar? [6]
Hypoglycemia and alcohol [7]
Does diabetes affect sex? [8]
Is it true that eating too many carbohydrates can cause diabetes? [9]

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [10]
Medical Services (CUMC) [11]
Published date:
Dec 11, 1998
Last reviewed on:
Jul 12, 2013
Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/diets-and-treatments-hypoglycemia-low-blood-sugar

Links