

Symptoms are Data - Is Your Relationship With Carbohydrates an Issue?

Read this list and note the symptoms that you sometimes relate to.

Fatigue	Dizziness
Mental fatigue	Weak spells
Jitters	Hot flashes
Depression	Hunger, nibbling
Confusion	Noise and light sensitivity
Anxiety or panic attacks	Nausea
Craving	Absent-mindedness
Exhaustion	Poor concentration
Irritability	Moodiness
Heart Palpitations	Insomnia
Excessive sweating	Temper tantrums
Ringing in the ears	Abrupt mood swings that mimic mental illness

These symptoms are all at times associated with low blood sugar or hypoglycemia. They are gathered from books written by doctors and nutritionists who advocate stabilizing blood sugar as a component of treatment for addicts. (See Readings.) As you can see from the list above, the symptoms of low blood sugar are wide-ranging and include physical, mental, emotional, and psychological effects. They present in different combinations in different people. The good news is that poor blood sugar regulation is a highly controllable risk factor for relapse in alcoholics, as well as its health relatives, obesity and diabetes. It is a subject that comes up frequently at Suppers meetings, and there is plenty you can do about it.

Poor blood sugar regulation is estimated to be present, according to numerous studies, in 75 to 95% of people who make it to the late stages of alcoholism. It can linger long after you quit if it is not addressed. There is no medication to cure this, although medical researchers are working on it. Diet, stress management, and exercise are the way.

What are the Symptoms Telling Us?

The brain's fuel source is glucose. We get it from eating plant foods. When the supply gets too low for normal brain function, a series of symptoms begins, starting with things like fatigue and mental fatigue. If you have poorly regulated blood sugar and you don't understand the language of your brain and follow its directions, you'll get the next symptoms in the series. The brain's message becomes more urgent, like craving, agitation, and anxiety. These are the signs that your body is going into an urgent mode to make you get more fuel to the brain. As adrenaline pumps to release stored sugar, you might experience sweats, panic attack, rage, an irrepressible urge to pick up a drink, or whatever your particular body does when your brain is loudly but inarticulately screaming for fuel.

Who is Affected?

Most alcoholics: Most alcoholics who make it to the late stages of their disease end up with poor blood sugar regulation after years of drinking break or impair the mechanisms that control sugar levels. (As a *predisposing* factor for drinking, low blood sugar has been found to affect more women than men. See Mathews-Larson, Milam and Ketcham in Readings.)

Health Relatives: The problem is more likely to be found in people with a family history of obesity, diabetes, mental illness, ADD, or alcoholism than in the rest of the population. It is partly genetic and partly a combination of how genes, environment, and behaviors interact.

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Specific populations: The incidence of blood sugar problems is greater in some populations than in others. Problems with alcohol sometimes go hand in hand. For example, while it is estimated that one in three American children born now will end up diabetic, the estimate is one in two for Hispanics, while black Americans are in between. The Native American population is also hard hit with both alcoholism and diabetes. The skyrocketing rates are largely attributable to how poor diet, stress, sedentary lifestyle, social factors, and environment issues combine with choice and genetic vulnerability.

People with mental health issues: Psychiatrists who practice medical nutrition have found blood sugar issues in 30 – 70 percent of psychiatric patients of all diagnostic categories. For schizophrenics, the benefits of controlling for low blood sugar include higher mental function and fewer relapses.

The poor are harder hit.

People who are physically inactive are at greater risk.

Anyone who is malnourished from processed foods and other sources of stress is more at risk. They tend to develop a problem called “appetite foolishness”, which means they desire to ingest things that temporarily make them feel better but create a bigger problem over time. Malnourishment is self-reinforcing. Once the cycle sets in, cravings can lead to the ingestion of more refined foods, drinks, and substances that deliver a quick fix of glucose to the brain. Carbohydrates raise blood sugar and trigger the release of insulin, the chemical that prevents the levels from going too high. The more refined they are, the more dramatic the effect. So a person who experiences relief after eating sugar has just used sugar as self-medication for low blood sugar. Alcohol also raises blood sugar, providing immediate relief, and has many other effects on the brain as well.

Research shows that the less time a population has been exposed to refined foods and drink the higher the rate of Type II diabetes (See Dapice in Readings). We are seeing this now particularly in Native Americans and Hispanics (See “Health Relatives” under Chapters on homepage) who have been exposed only for a few years or generations and whose diabetes statistics are skyrocketing. This is preventable.

What Raises Blood Sugar

The trick to raising blood sugar appropriately is to not do it too fast. Anything refined --like alcohol, sugar and white pasta -- or drug-like -- for example, coffee and cigarettes -- raises it so fast that it's a set up for another crash. Eating complex carbohydrates like whole fruit, whole vegetables, and whole grains raises blood sugar appropriately, especially in a balanced diet with protein and high quality fats. Alcohol works really fast. The ethanol molecule is minute, only 2 ½ times the weight of water. A starch molecule, by comparison, is 250,000 the weight of an alcohol molecule. Both raise blood sugar. But starch can take 3 or 4 hours of complicated digestive break down in stomach acids and pancreatic enzymes before its constituents reach the bloodstream. Teeny alcohol zips through membranes. Some is even directly absorbed in the mouth and esophagus. It's an instant band-aid for low blood sugar (See Milam and Ketcham in Readings).

Growth hormones and stress hormones like adrenaline, which force stored sugar into the blood stream, also raise blood sugar quickly.

Coffee and cigarettes or anything that stimulates the release of adrenaline raise blood sugar.

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Stress raises blood sugar, also because it stimulates the release of adrenaline.

Low blood sugar itself causes the raising of blood sugar because it sends the body into an emergency state that brings about an adrenaline response.

And in a person with poor regulation, whatever makes it rise fast is likely to make it crash.

What is Protective?

Eating whole foods. If you eat animal or vegetable protein, high quality fats, and complex carbohydrates (whole fruits, whole vegetables, whole grains), it normalizes blood sugar levels. These foods also slow down the faster ones, so a belly full of appropriate foods shields somewhat from dessert-like foods. Dessert-like foods or sweet drinks are more damaging if taken on an empty stomach.

Exercise stabilizes blood sugar.

Lowering stress responses, limiting fight or flight responses (See Flight or Flight v. Rest and Digest under Chapters on home page).

Increasing relaxation responses, yoga, meditation, prayer, etc.

Sleeping and spending enough time in darkness (See Wiley in Sources).

Drinking enough water.

How Low Blood Sugar Relates to Stress

In its parsimony, nature tends to get as many uses as it can out of a biochemical. So if a chemical is good for two or three jobs or more, the body doesn't invent more different ones. (Think of how testosterone regulates sex drive in both sexes and aggression.) Adrenaline is just such a chemical. It stimulates us for times of fight or flight; it also causes the body to release stored sugar. So regardless of the reason for running adrenaline – a saber toothed tiger or a Coke or a bout of hypoglycemia – the body will experience a stress response just because adrenaline is running. There are other variables, but stabilizing blood sugar and reducing stress hormones like adrenaline will stabilize the vulnerable person in many ways, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Correcting the Problem

The answer is simple; it may not be easy.

Because the biological aspect of alcoholism and blood sugar regulation start with some kind of processed or "de-natured" plant foods, the solution must include returning to unprocessed foods and "re-naturing" the person. Eating whole foods and excluding refined, sweet and starchy ones, is the basic formula. Upping the protective factors and reducing the risk factors may require a lot of retraining, cultivating taste buds, and getting support from your family and therapeutic friends. The Suppers way is to accomplish this in the context of meetings and in the authentic settings of life.

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Other Variables

Stabilizing blood sugar is no miracle cure. It just resolves the problems when the problems are caused by low blood sugar. Depending on the natural reality of your drinking problem, dealing with low blood sugar may be the total but more likely the partial answer. But it is a powerful tool. Eating a diet of whole foods has reduced symptoms and suffering in people with alcoholism, diabetes, obesity and some mental illnesses. Other diet-related variables in these illnesses are food sensitivity; environmental allergies as to molds, ethanol, and chemicals; and the need for dietary and supplemental sources of the building blocks of optimal neurotransmitter function. Fortunately, blood sugar stabilization and happy neurotransmitter production require similar diet and lifestyle change because they are closely related. (See Ross in Readings.) Every alcoholic's natural reality – an accumulation of body, mind, and spirit conditions – is different. But stabilizing the alcoholic's body with a steady supply of nourishing whole foods is arguably the most powerful step the alcoholic can take to put his or her body to work for sobriety.

Readings

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