



Health Tips

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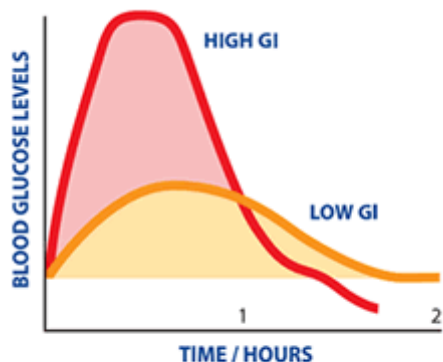
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Health Tip: Understanding the Glycemic Index

Last week's Health Tip on **reactive hypoglycemia** generated a great deal of interest and comments, perhaps due to the number of people who experience hypoglycemic episodes. This week I promised to discuss the **glycemic index (GI)**, a topic with important ties to reactive hypoglycemia. The **GI** was initially developed to address the dietary concerns of diabetics, but has found application in weight loss management as well as in the treatment of reactive hypoglycemia.

The **GI** ranks carbohydrates according to their effect on blood glucose levels. During digestion, those carbohydrates that are quickly broken down and rapidly release glucose into the bloodstream are said to have a high **GI**. Conversely, those that are broken down more slowly and release glucose gradually into the bloodstream have a low **GI**. Foods in this ranking are compared to a standard, such as pure glucose or white bread which top the scale at a **GI** of 100. Foods with a low **GI** (55 or less) include whole grain breads, pasta and foods with a minimum amount of carbohydrate such as nuts and milk. The following table divides foods into low, medium and high **GI**:



The amount of carbohydrate in the reference and test food must be the same.

Classification	GI range	Examples
Low GI	55 or less	most fruit and vegetables (except potatoes, carrots, watermelon), whole grain breads, pasta, milk, yogurt, cheese, soybeans
Medium GI	56 - 69	whole wheat bread, brown rice, orange juice, sweet potato, banana, raisins, pineapple, corn, cookies

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High GI	70 - 99	White bread, refined cereals with sugar, instant oatmeal, potatoes, carrots, watermelon, white rice, white flour bagel, candy, soda, sports drinks
	100	straight glucose

For some time now, the **GI** has been used to assist with weight reduction. The thinking has been that a sudden increase in blood sugar produces an insulin "surge" which then drives glucose into cells and prevents fat breakdown in the body. Indeed a number of popular diets (South Beach, Atkins, Zone, etc.) have taken the concept of avoiding insulin surges to extremes by severely restricting carbohydrates altogether. Many nutritionists dispute the effectiveness of this type of diet or express concern about the types of foods (often high fat with the exclusion of "good" carbohydrates) that are advised with these types of diets. At the end of the day, the ability to lose weight hinges on the number of calories ingested vs. expended. Using the **GI** as a way of selecting foods in a weight-reduction diet may not be as effective as once thought.

Diabetics have to be concerned about the daily fluctuations in their blood glucose, and as mentioned, the **GI** was originally developed to help in diabetes management. But not everyone agrees that eliminating foods in the higher categories for foods with a lower **GI** is always best. The **GI** of a food might be one value when it is eaten alone and another when it is eaten with other foods as part of a complete meal. Also, most **GI** values reflect the blood glucose response to food eaten 2 hours previously, whereas glucose levels after eating some foods remain elevated much longer, particularly for those who have diabetes. One of the most important ways that the **GI** can be applied to diabetes management is if the diabetic finds that certain foods excessively raise their after-meal blood glucose. Usually these foods will be in the moderate to high **GI** categories. Once identified, these foods should be restricted or avoided. Another important connection between the **GI** and diabetes is that diets with high glycemic loads have been associated with an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes mellitus (DM).



This leads us back to reactive hypoglycemia. In those with reactive hypoglycemia, paying attention to the **GI** when making dietary choices is perhaps its most important application. Eating highly refined or sugary foods



(high **GI**) is more likely to cause a sudden rise in blood sugar, triggering an insulin response with resulting drop in blood sugar. If the blood sugar drops too low or too rapidly, the symptoms of hypoglycemia result. By concentrating on eating foods in the medium to low **GI** range, these wide swings in blood sugar can be ameliorated. In addition to paying attention to the **GI**, the other dietary measures mentioned in last week's Health Tip----eating a nutritionally balanced diet, eating small meals or a snack every 2-3 hours, getting plenty of dietary fiber, etc.-----are important in treating reactive hypoglycemia also. For more on the Glycemic Index and an allied concept, Glycemic Load, go to the [Linus Pauling Institute](#) at Oregon State University. If you would like to look up the **GI** of a particular food, the [University of Sydney](#) provides an on-line data base. Go to the section titled "**GI** data base" and enter the food that you would like to know about.

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