

Diabetes and Natural Medicine

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Diabetes is a common, chronic illness that requires great care and attention in order to manage it effectively. It is characterized by high blood sugar levels. These high blood sugar levels create damage to the circulatory system, thus increasing the risk of disease in many organs including the eyes, kidneys, nerves, heart and cardiovascular system.

Natural medicine and dietary measures can greatly enhance the long term health of a person with diabetes. Blood sugar management can be enhanced significantly with proper natural care.

Many people don't realize that the drugs often prescribed for diabetes have a limited ability to help and can create more problems in the long run. Oral hypoglycemic drugs may help reduce blood sugars for a while, but the effectiveness usually wanes over time. Within 3 months, 40% of people aren't able to control blood sugars adequately and long term, the overall success rate of oral hypoglycemic drugs is no more than 20-30% at best. The next step is insulin injections. High levels of insulin are linked with further health problems including obesity. Relying on drugs is not the only way to go. Diabetics have much more control over their health than many realize.

Type 1 diabetes occurs when the pancreas does not secrete enough insulin. This type of diabetes usually comes on in childhood or early adulthood. These people require insulin injections and careful dietary management. This type accounts for about 10% of diabetics.

Type II diabetes is much more common and normally comes on after age 40. The

blood has high levels of blood sugar not because of lack of insulin, but because the receptors on the cells of the body are insensitive to insulin. When the insulin receptors are "burned-out", sugar is concentrated in the blood rather than being transported into the cells by the insulin. There are many factors that effect insulin receptor sensitivity. Obesity decreases the sensitivity of receptors to insulin, and approximately 90% of people with Type II diabetes are obese. Conversely, exercise is an excellent way to increase the insulin receptor sensitivity.

Diabetics often have high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides, which further increases their risk of cardiovascular disease. The reason for this connection is that in Type II diabetes, the body often produces excess insulin to try to compensate for the high blood sugar or if one takes oral hypoglycemic drugs, insulin production is increased. Insulin encourages blood sugar to then be stored as fat as well as other substances. Cholesterol and triglycerides are both fats that are increased when insulin stores sugars as fats. However, excess insulin is not necessary if blood sugar can be controlled via diet, or by increasing receptor sensitivity.

The key to dietary blood sugar control is to avoid foods that your digestive system can quickly break down into sugar and thus deliver a sudden load of sugar to the blood. The foods that break down quickly are basically any food that if you sucked on it, it would quickly break down in your mouth and taste sweet. These are the foods that are said to have a high glycemic index. Common examples are candy, sweets, fruit juice, dried fruit, bread, pasta, cereals, bagels, chips, french fries. As a group these are called refined carbohydrates. Non refined carbohydrates are fresh fruit and whole

grains like brown rice, barley, millet and quinoa. Their glycemic index is lower, meaning they are like “time-release” carbohydrates and usually diabetics can handle them in small quantities, especially if eaten with protein foods such as meat, eggs, nuts, seed, beans and soy products.

The standard Western diet is very high in refined carbohydrates, accounting for the fact that Westerners have a significantly higher rate of diabetes than any other culture in the world. We must question our diet in light of the poor results it creates in our long term health.

What can you eat? The optimal diet should consist of whole, unprocessed foods such as fresh vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds, nut butters (almond butter), organic meats, fish, beans. Fruit should be limited to 1-2 per day and blood sugars monitored closely. Protein is particularly helpful in balancing blood sugar as it nourishes the body without raising blood sugar. Eating small amounts of quality protein at each meal is one of the best ways to balance blood sugar. It is important to enjoy low fat animal protein sources, as excess animal fats are linked with many diseases.

An excellent book that makes a compelling argument for the importance of a low carbohydrate, high vegetable and moderate protein diet is “Dr. Bernstein’s Diabetes Solution”. Dr. Bernstein is a medical doctor, endocrinologist and diabetes specialist who suffered for years with brittle diabetes until he discovered the diet that worked for him. His book shares his

experience of working with thousands of diabetics to achieve blood sugar control without excessive reliance on drugs and insulin.

Diabetics should also take advantage of the wide range of natural therapies designed to prevent or treat the common ailments that go along with diabetes. For instance, the herbal medicine bilberry has been shown in scientific studies to significantly reduce the eye problems (diabetic retinopathy) that lead to blindness in some diabetics. Antioxidant nutrients such as vitamin C, zinc, vitamin E, and selenium help to prevent the damage to the blood vessels that is responsible for so many of the diabetic problems. Chromium is a critical mineral in diabetes. Supplementation with chromium has been shown to decrease blood sugar levels and help with cholesterol. Other herbal medicine such as bitter melon and *Gymnema sylvestre* have long been used for treatment of diabetes and scientific studies are now proving their effectiveness in helping to control blood sugars and decrease the dependency on drugs and insulin.

With proper coaching from a naturopathic physician, diabetics can learn to optimize their health through natural, common sense, time tested methods. The dietary and herbal measures outlined above all have many long-term side benefits instead of side effects. You can take charge of your health and enjoy the freedom that good health provides if you learn to make the lifestyle and medicine choices that add up to good health

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