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Not All Carbs Are the Enemy: What We May Be Missing About Blood Sugar Management

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The source of our carbohydrates matters too, as does the amount of fibre those foods provide



Carbohydrates have a reputation problem. As conversations around diabetes and metabolic health grow, they are often among the first things people look to cut out.

Sugar gets singled out, carbohydrates are treated as a single category, and low-glycaemic foods are often seen as relevant only to people with diabetes.

But carbohydrates are not all the same. The type we eat, composition, how quickly they are digested and absorbed all influence their effect on blood glucose levels. Simply cutting back on carbohydrates or sugar tells only part of the story.

As we mark Diabetes Awareness Month, it is worth challenging three common assumptions about carbohydrates and blood glucose management.

Myth 1: All carbohydrates cause the same blood sugar response

Carbohydrates differ in how quickly they are broken down and absorbed. Some are digested rapidly and cause blood glucose to rise more quickly, while others are absorbed more slowly, resulting in a more gradual rise.

Take Palatinose™ (generic: Isomaltulose), for example. Derived from sugar beet, it is a slowly digestible carbohydrate that provides the same amount of energy as sucrose but results in a more gradual rise in blood glucose. The glucose and fructose in Palatinose™ are joined by a stronger bond than in sucrose, which digestive enzymes break down more slowly. A systematic review of 11 randomised controlled trials found that isomaltulose produced a lower blood glucose response than sucrose at the 30-minute mark.[1]

Carbohydrate quality, however, is not just about how quickly a carbohydrate is digested. The source of our carbohydrates matters too, as does the amount of fibre those foods provide. The WHO's guidance reflects this broader view, recommending that carbohydrates should come primarily from whole grains, vegetables, fruits and pulses.[2]

This does not mean that all rapidly digested carbohydrates should be avoided. Rather, we should look beyond the total amount of carbohydrate in a food and consider the type we are consuming.

Myth 2: Cutting sugar automatically makes a food better for blood sugar management

Reducing sugar can be one way to improve a food's nutritional profile, but it is not the only consideration. What replaces the sugar matters too. A product with less sugar is not automatically nutritionally better, particularly if its overall nutritional composition is overlooked.

When sugar is reduced, another ingredient usually has to take its place to maintain the product's taste, texture, bulk or functionality. The nutritional impact therefore depends not only on what is removed, but also on what replaces it.

This is where the choice of ingredients becomes important. Chicory root fibres such as inulin and oligofructose can replace some of the sugar in certain food formulations while also increasing the product's fibre content.[3]

Research has demonstrated how this can work in practice. In two randomised controlled trials involving healthy adults, researchers tested a yoghurt drink with 20% less sugar, partly replaced by oligofructose, and a fruit jelly with 30% less sugar, partly replaced by inulin. Both products produced lower post-meal blood glucose responses than their full-sugar counterparts.[4] The findings relate to the specific formulations tested, but show how ingredient selection can influence both a food's nutritional profile and its effect on blood glucose.

Of course, reformulation is not simply a matter of swapping ingredients. Taste, texture and functionality still matter. The challenge for manufacturers is to improve a product's nutritional profile while retaining the qualities that consumers expect.

Myth 3: Low-glycaemic foods are only relevant to people with diabetes

Mention “low-glycaemic foods” and many people will immediately think of diabetic diets. It is an understandable association, but it makes the subject seem more specialised than it needs to be.

For people with diabetes, managing blood glucose is an important part of living with the condition. However, blood glucose management is also important before a diabetes diagnosis. Prediabetes occurs when blood glucose levels are higher than normal, but not yet within the range for diabetes. At this stage, lifestyle changes — including a healthy, balanced diet and regular physical activity — can help reduce the risk of progression to type 2 diabetes.[5][6]

But, blood glucose response is not relevant only to people with diabetes or prediabetes. It is a normal part of how the body processes food, and the types of carbohydrates we eat influence how blood glucose responds after a meal.

That distinction can be useful even when blood glucose management is not a specific health concern. Lower-GI foods generally produce a lower blood glucose response than higher-GI alternatives. This does not mean every meal needs to be low-GI, or that people need to avoid higher-GI foods. Rather, it gives consumers another consideration when choosing what to eat across the day: they can include lower-GI options at some meals without having to make every carbohydrate choice conform to the same rule.

For manufacturers, this also means looking beyond specialist products designed for people with diabetes. There is an opportunity to consider how the nutritional profile of everyday foods can be improved, making lower-glycaemic options accessible to a wider range of consumers.

A more considered approach to carbohydrates

The conversation around carbohydrates should not be about choosing between eating them and avoiding them. It should be about making better carbohydrate choices. Beyond the amount of sugar a food contains, the types of carbohydrates we consume, how they are digested and how they contribute to a food's overall nutritional profile all matter.

This Diabetes Awareness Month, we should move the conversation beyond simply cutting sugar. For consumers, that means recognising that the amount of sugar in a food is only one part of the picture. For manufacturers, it means looking at how ingredient choices, carbohydrate quality and nutritional composition come together to create better products without

compromising on taste and enjoyment.

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[4] Lightowler H, Thondre S, Holz A, Theis S. (2018). “Replacement of glycaemic carbohydrates by inulin-type fructans from chicory (oligofructose, inulin) reduces the postprandial blood glucose and insulin response to foods: report of two double-blind, randomized, controlled trials.” *European Journal of Nutrition*, 57(3), 1259–1268. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00394-017-1409-z

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