"How to Beat Hypoglycemia for Good"

- a refreshing, common-sense approach to eating right to beat low blood sugar

By Chris Mole
Introduction

If you’ve been diagnosed with hypoglycemia, you can count yourself lucky. Yes, you really are fortunate because millions of people around the world have hypoglycemia … and they don’t even know it.

You, at least, have the advantage of knowing what’s wrong with you. You have a firm diagnosis of hypoglycemia. And your doctor has probably given you some guidelines as to what to eat to overcome your hypoglycemia.

The reason I’ve written this report is because there’s so much conflicting advice about the best diet for hypoglycemia. If you’re confused as a result of the various ideas you’ve been told … and read about … I want to share some commonsense about diet that I’ve learned through trial and error during the past 25 years.

You’ll be pleasantly surprised by what you read in this report. You’ll discover you can overcome your hypoglycemia with much less pain … and a much less restricted diet … than you’ve probably been told.

I was first diagnosed with hypoglycemia in 1978 … when I was 22 years old. I actually had chronic fatigue syndrome for several years but that wasn’t diagnosed until much later. Fortunately, I came across a wise old doctor who tested me for hypoglycemia with a full 6-hour glucose tolerance test. He confirmed I had hypoglycemia. The problem was, he didn’t really know much about the best diet to eat. I remember him telling me to “eat some cold potato before bedtime”. He never mentioned about not eating sugar!

So I had to study about hypoglycemia myself. I read everything I could get my hands on, over several years. And I experimented with all kinds of diets – from high-protein Atkins-type diets to high-carbohydrate, low-fat diets – and all kinds of other diets such as food combining, macrobiotic, Ayurvedic etc.

It took me about 10 years to discover what really worked for me.

My hypoglycemia is totally under control now. I feel great most of the time … unless I slip up and have a binge on something sweet. Then I feel the bad effects for a day or two afterwards. But at least I know why I feel bad!

This book explains what I have learned about hypoglycemia and diet. I believe it’s the most commonsense approach you’ll read anywhere. And above all, it really works.

So, enjoy this report and I promise if you follow the advice it contains, you’ll find a new sense of health, well-being and freedom in your life.

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WHAT IS HYPOGLYCEMIA?

Some experts believe up to 20 percent of adults in the western world suffer from hypoglycemia. This is easy to believe when you consider the incredible amounts of sugar and refined carbohydrates that people eat and drink today. And with the diets of today’s children being even worse than their parents’ we’re heading for an even worse situation with hypoglycemia in future.

I don’t intend to get into a detailed medical explanation of hypoglycemia because it is complicated and somewhat controversial. However, in simple terms, hypoglycemia means rapid rises and falls in the level of glucose in the blood. This is due to a malfunctioning of the pancreas and liver, predominantly. Exhaustion of the adrenal glands is also a factor.

In a healthy person, the pancreas produces just enough insulin to neutralise any sugar eaten, to bring the blood sugar back to normal. But in people who have hypoglycemia, the pancreas overreacts and produces too much insulin in response to the sugar eaten. This over-abundance of insulin metabolises not only the sugar which has been eaten but also some of the glucose which was already present in the bloodstream.

The result is a state of low blood sugar which can cause an alarming number of distressing symptoms - fatigue being only one of them. Other symptoms include headaches, dizziness and feeling faint, irritability, depression, difficulty in remembering, blurred vision and in most cases an overwhelming craving for something sweet or a stimulant such as tea or coffee.

If any of those symptoms sound familiar, particularly if they are accompanied by a craving for sweet food, then it is very likely you are suffering from hypoglycemia.

In addition, strenuous exercise also lowers the blood sugar. This means if you have hypoglycaemia, you should be careful not to over-do any physical activity. After heavy physical work, a healthy person feels tired, his energy has been drained. However, if he rests, his strength will return reasonably quickly.

Basically, what happens with exercise is that it burns up part of the glucose in the blood. Stored glycogen in the liver is then used to bring the blood sugar level back to normal - even if the person doesn't eat anything immediately. The adrenal glands help raise the blood sugar level by releasing catecholamines which convert glycogen into blood sugar.

Thus, the healthy body has a system of checks and balances, involving mainly the liver, pancreas and adrenal glands, to ensure the blood sugar level stays stable.
But in a person suffering from hypoglycaemia, the system doesn't work properly. After strenuous exercise, the person's blood glucose is depleted and the adrenal glands react by releasing catecholamines to convert stored glycogen into glucose. But unlike the process in a healthy person, in the hypoglycemic the new glucose stimulates the pancreas to produce more insulin - which once again lowers the blood sugar level.

The pancreas of a hypoglycemic person is extremely sensitive to extra glucose, whatever the source. It over-reacts to glucose with a secretion of insulin too large to maintain an equilibrium in the body - and the person suffers the symptoms of hypoglycemia.

The cure for hypoglycemia is to prevent large swings in the blood sugar level, by eating little or no sugar and by avoiding excessive physical exercise. But it is much more difficult than it sounds. Sugar is found in so many foods these days, particularly packaged foods, which almost always have sugar added. Some people are also sensitive to "natural" sugars such as those in fruit and even milk.

So in the next chapter I’ll look at the vital question of what to eat if you want to get well from hypoglycemia.
WHAT IS THE BEST DIET FOR HYPOGLYCEMIA?

Various diets have been proposed for hypoglycemia over the years. The earliest treatment was a high-protein, high-fat diet with a minimum of carbohydrates, in the belief that all carbohydrates stimulated the pancreas to produce insulin. Such diets had mixed results and are certainly not healthy in the long run. They have largely been abandoned but variations still exist, such as the Atkins diet and more recently Barry Sears' "zone" diet which involves a 30/30/40 ratio between protein, fat and carbohydrate.

The prominent American nutritionist Paavo Aerola started a change in thinking about hypoglycemia treatment in the 1970s when he advocated a largely vegetarian diet with an emphasis on complex carbohydrates. Aerola's diet was popular for many years and very successful. However, it relies heavily on dairy products for protein - which doesn't suit everyone.

More recently, a concept known as the "glycemic index" of foods has been developed. The glycemic index represents the amount by which a food raises the blood sugar level, with glucose having an index of 100. It is interesting that foods such as white bread can raise the blood sugar almost as much as ordinary white sugar, whereas as whole-grain breads cause a much slower rise in blood sugar.

I have proved this myself - before I knew anything about glycemic indexes. When I was experimenting with the high-carbohydrate, low-fat diets I often had a white bread roll with a small amount of low-fat cheese (no butter) and salad for lunch. I would always get a headache during the afternoon following such lunches but I persisted because I thought it was a "healthy" low-fat meal and it had no-sugar.

Occasionally, I would have a thick cheese sandwich on wholemeal bread (with butter) and a glass of milk - supposedly a very bad meal from the low-fat viewpoint. But I felt great during the afternoon after such a lunch. Fats such as butter and cheese can be useful in controlling low blood sugar because they slow down the absorption of carbohydrate. Of course, that is not a licence to eat a lot of fat - nor a lot of anything, for that matter.

A huge meal, even if it contains no sugar, can raise the blood sugar more than a candy bar. Getting back to the glycemic index, it can be confusing sometimes because different studies give different indexes for the same foods. For example, some studies have found potatoes to have a high glycemic index (making them unadvisable for people with hypoglycemia) while others recommended potatoes as one of the best foods for keeping blood sugar stable!
Fruit is another controversial food in relation to hypoglycemia. Some experts advocate eating fruit because its sugars (mainly fructose) are “natural” and thus don’t affect the hypoglycemic like refined sugar does. Others find better results by avoiding fruit, at least in the initial stages of treatment. I found fruit often affected me adversely, particularly sweet fruit like bananas, grapes or watermelon.

THE GOOD OLD-FASHIONED BALANCED DIET

To sell diet book today, you need to come up with something even more outrageous than the previous best-selling diet book. That’s why we have such extreme views on diet being promoted by best-selling authors. If you wrote a book advocating a good old-fashioned balanced diet, with three meals a day of protein, fats and carbohydrates, hardly anyone would buy the book. People are always looking for some new, cutting edge theory on diet.

This is because most of us eat unbalanced diets. We just don’t want to admit it. So we look for any theory to help us get well, lose weight or whatever else we want from our diet – while ignoring the obvious truth that is staring us in the face.

So I’m going to advocate a good old-fashioned balanced diet. This is so rare in a diet book today, that it almost does qualify as being something new!

You do need to avoid sugar initially

Okay, now down to the nitty gritty. In addition to a balanced diet, you do need to avoid sugar in all its forms, for the first few weeks of your recovery from hypoglycemia.

And if you’re like most hypoglycemics, this will prove very difficult. Because you’re addicted to sugar. Yes, it’s an addiction that very difficult to break. You need to make a decision. Do you want to keep on over-eating of sugary foods – or do you want to get well?

Assuming you really do want to get well, then you need to start looking at your diet for everything that contains sugar – in all its forms. This means not just sugar, but everything that contains sugar. I’m not going to go into a tedious list of everything that contains sugar, just to fill up more space in this book. Just use your common sense. And read labels. You know what contains sugar without me having to tell you!

As I mentioned in the pervious chapter, fruit contains simple sugars and can adversely affect many hypoglycemics. If you find you’re not getting better after eliminating all other sugars, try cutting out fruit for a while – especially sweet fruit like bananas. You may find if you eat fruit on its own, between meals, you get hypoglycaemic symptoms afterwards. But if you eat fruit as part of a balanced meal, you are fine. (I’ll explain this later.)
I have experimented with different diets to see which has the most beneficial effects on my blood sugar levels. I have found the best results with a diet based on complex carbohydrates and adequate protein, with a certain amount of fat to slow down the impact of the carbohydrates on my blood sugar. Fat is usually regarded as the main villain by modern diet writers but a certain amount of fat is essential, particularly if you suffer from low blood sugar.

In fact, many people develop low blood sugar by following the popular high-carbohydrate, low-fat diet theories to extreme. They think fruit is a "good" food and eat lots of it while avoiding foods like eggs, cheese and whole milk. But they could be better off avoiding fruit if they are hypoglycemic and eating eggs for breakfast.

Eggs are a particularly valuable food. They help build up the adrenal glands - a vital factor in recovery from hypoglycemia. Of course, they contain cholesterol and should be eaten in moderation. But one or two eggs a day will not harm most people's cholesterol levels and, in fact, there is growing evidence that sugar is much more harmful in raising cholesterol than foods such as eggs, dairy products or meat.

Many experts on hypoglycemia advocate six small meals a day rather than three meals. It used to be almost universally accepted that frequent, small meals was best. But some writers on the subject have recently challenged this belief. The problem with eating six or more meals a day is that it can easily lead to over-eating – something that can adversely affect hypoglycemics because the body is flooded with extra sugar which it doesn't need.

In the early stages, you might find you need a snack between meals to alleviate extreme symptoms of low blood sugar. However, I believe it is best to establish the habit of eating three balanced meals a day and perhaps one regular snack. Having said that, you shouldn't allow more than five or six hours between meals or you will start to experience hypoglycemic symptoms. Eating breakfast at about 7.30am, lunch about 12.30pm and dinner about 6pm should be fine for most people, without the need for too many snacks. But if a meal is late, for some reason, then it's best to have a snack (but not a sweet snack!).

I always have a snack about 4pm in the afternoon – usually a cup of tea and piece of toast with butter. It keeps me going until dinner time.

Eating snacks can also be detrimental if you have a problem with addictive eating or a tendency to binge on sweet foods which many people with hypoglycemia do, in a desperate attempt to make themselves feel better. By eating three balanced meals a day, you have the best chance to keep your blood sugar stable and avoid destructive sweet snacks.
So what is a ‘balanced diet’?

A balanced meal should contain some protein and complex carbohydrate plus a moderate amount of fat. A good breakfast is one or two eggs on one or two slices of buttered wholegrain toast; or unsweetened porridge or cereal plus one or two pieces of buttered toast.

Lunch could be sandwiches with wholegrain bread and butter plus a filling of salad vegetables and a small amount of cheese, meat, chicken or fish; or it could be a more substantial meal of meat or fish with cooked vegetables, potatoes, pasta or rice. Forget dessert and, until you feel better, avoid even fruit at the end of the meal initially.

If dinner is the main meal of the day, there is an endless variety of suitable foods, according to your taste. The main principle is to eat protein, complex carbohydrates and vegetables, and avoid refined sugar in any form.

If you really need to finish with something sweet, try a small home-made muffin, biscuit or piece of cake, made with just a small amount of sugar and have only a small helping! You’ll need to experiment to see how much sugar you can tolerate.

Eating sugar as part of a meal has less effect on blood sugar levels than eating a sweet snack on its own. That's another good reason for eating just three meals a day. It is important not to over-eat because that overworks the liver, which plays a vital role in keeping blood sugar stable. An overworked liver is the cause of much hypoglycemia and it takes time for a damaged liver to restore itself.

So don't set back your progress by over-eating. Listen to your body and stop when you feel comfortably full. If you are not eating sugar, you are less likely to overeat because most over-eating tends to be of sugary, fatty foods.

It usually takes at least a month to recover from hypoglycemia by following a balanced diet. Some people start feeling better after a week or two, while others who have been sick a long time might find they need three months or more to really start feeling the benefits. Initially, you will almost certainly feel intense cravings for something sweet and may be tempted to lapse.

If you are hypoglycemic, you are essentially addicted to sugar and you are fighting something which can be as difficult as an addiction to cigarettes or alcohol. If you do slip, pick yourself up and start again. The first week or two is the hardest in starting a low-sugar diet that's when the cravings will be at their most intense. Eating even a small amount of something sweet can actually trigger a full-blown binge because of the way your body reacts to sugar.

Don't despair. You may have to pick yourself up many times before you can stick to a balanced diet. It just proves that you have been over-dependent on sugar for too long and that you must break the addiction before you can ever expect to enjoy good health again.

Keep that as your motivation when the sugar cravings come. Tell yourself: "I might feel bad now but I'll be ten times worse if I binge".
EXERCISE AND REST

Milliseconds of people around the world follow exercise programmes in the belief that it is good for their health. They jog, walk, go to the gym, swim, cycle, play squash or golf to "keep fit". I don't want to knock the benefits of exercise, it is undoubtedly good for us in moderation. But when you suffer from hypoglycemia, exercise is a mixed blessing.

Many people with hypoglycemia begin to exercise more, in the belief that their tiredness is caused by "getting unfit". Sadly, the exercise can push them over the edge into a state of collapse. At that point there is only one thing you can do - rest.

In my late teens and early 20s I was a competitive runner. I was proud of my fitness and my ability to push myself to a state of exhaustion on long runs. It's a great feeling to be fit. But if you ignore your body's cries for rest, something has to give eventually. Exercise enthusiasts tend to be highly-motivated individuals who push themselves hard in both work and play. That is good - up to a certain point. But life is a question of balance.

Work must be balanced with rest and sleep. It's common sense. So, in the early stages of your recovery from hypoglycemia you must be careful not to over-exercise, nor over-exert yourself physically in any other way. The normal tasks of daily living will provide enough exercise. Gradually, you can build up to walking but never push yourself too hard. Forget the old adage of "no gain without pain". Instead think: "no pain means maximum gain".

When it starts to hurt or you feel exhausted, back off. You're not training for the Olympics. You simply want good health. And when you do push yourself too hard, as you inevitably will, don't feel guilty about resting. Forget about exercise until you've fully recovered from your over-exertion.

Everyone's capacity is different. There are no hard and fast rules, you have to work it out for yourself. Life is a balance of exercise, rest and sleep. When we get any of those three out of balance, our health suffers.
EXTRA BONUS – MORE THOUGHTS ON DIET IN GENERAL

More has been written about diet than almost any other subject under the sun. And the more you study nutrition, the more confusing it becomes, with an endless stream of theories about what you should and should not eat - many of them contradicting one another.

If you are suffering from hypoglycemia, the chances are you have already experimented quite a bit with your diet. You might have been to an alternative health professional who has given you dietary guidelines to follow, or you might, like me, have started reading on the subject of nutrition in an effort to find an answer to your health problems.

During the past 20 years or so, I have read extensively on the subject of diet. And not only have I studied countless nutritional theories but I have also experimented personally with many of them. Macrobiotics, the Pritikin diet, the Hay diet (food combining), the Aarola diet, vegetarianism, Ayurvedic diets, not to mention elimination diets for food allergies - you name it and I have probably studied it, if not tried it out on myself.

I spent many painful years seeking for the truth about diet. This included about three years going down the track of food allergies to find out why I was feeling so terrible.

It began with tests by an allergy specialist in Wellington. He gave me a list of foods to which I was supposedly allergic and advised me to avoid them scrupulously for several weeks. Even a tiny taste of a forbidden food could trigger my symptoms, he said. My list of allergic foods was daunting. There were the usual ones like wheat, dairy products and eggs, as well as citrus fruits, apples, potatoes and several others which I cannot now remember.

With such a list of forbidden foods, I had to change my diet drastically. Eating out became a major problem for my hosts. I started eating a lot of dried fruit. It was among my "legal" foods and it seemed to satisfy my craving for something sweet, hence I would demolish a packet of dates in one sitting, or a packet of dried figs or apricots.

Looking back, it is hard to believe that I persisted so long with the food allergy line. My health improved little, if at all. Yet I was convinced I would one day find the food, or foods, to which I was allergic, and my problems would be over. I now believe the cure for so-called food allergies is to build up your general health and eliminate the root cause of the problem, which is a weakened immune system.
Many so-called allergies are actually food addictions. If you find yourself craving - and eating - large amounts of any food then you are almost certainly addicted to that food. Food addiction can be just as powerful as addiction to alcohol, cigarettes and drugs.

An underlying hypoglycemia, or low blood sugar, seems to exist whenever addictions occur. Tests have found hypoglycemia is almost universal in alcoholics.

The first step is to avoid all refined sugars and also-to restrict even natural sugars such as fruit and juices, as well as alcohol and caffeine. If you have low blood sugar, the chances are that you crave sweet things, especially when you are tired or under stress. In fact, if you regularly get irresistible cravings for sweet it is almost certain that you have low blood sugar.

So giving up sugar and sweet things can be an enormous battle at first. However, when you start to notice the amazing increase in your energy you will be less tempted to eat sweet things because you know the inevitable ‘slump’ will follow.

So, what is a healthy diet? There's no easy answer because almost every expert seems to differ. Some say you should eat lightly or even have no breakfast at all while others say breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dinner like pauper. Some promote a vegetarian diet while others say animal protein is essential for good health. Some believe whole grains should be the basis of the diet while others say 'grain is for the birds' and warn of allergies to wheat.

Some tell you to eat margarine or low-fat spreads, while others promote butter because it is 'natural'. And then there is the endless list of foods and drinks which you should avoid, depending on which expert you read - in fact, if you believed everything written on diet, there would be very little left to eat.

Even the 'official' view of what makes up a good diet has not been consistent during the past 30 years or so. In the 1960s, when I was a child, we were advised to eat daily from the 'four food groups' - meat, dairy products, cereals and fruit/vegetables. Milk was the old-fashioned type with a layer of cream on top and it was quite acceptable to pour the cream on your porridge. We were told to drink a pint of milk a day and eat plenty of dairy products and meat.

But things started to change in the late 1970s and early '80s when Nathan Pritikin's low-fat, high-carbohydrate diet caught the attention of the media. Gradually, the prevailing wisdom changed. Today, the official line from health authorities is that we should cut back on fatty dairy products and meat, and eat plenty of complex carbohydrates such as bread and pasta.
Pasta has become a gourmet food and ethnic diets have become popular because they are supposedly more healthy than the old-fashioned British fare of 'meat and three veges'. Gone are the days of 'bangers and mash' for dinner, and apple crumble with cream. Instead, it's pasta and salad, with frozen yoghurt (low-fat, of course) for dessert.

But the tide is starting to turn again. Many people who have faithfully followed the low-fat, high-carbohydrate gospel have found it doesn't provide the boundless energy and super health that the experts say it will. In fact, many people wonder why they feel so lousy when they are so conscientiously doing everything 'right' and following the 'food pyramid' guidelines to the letter.

Because of the discovery that low-fat diets don't suit everyone, books promoting low-carbohydrate diets are starting to make a come-back. In fact, this is the current wave of diet wisdom. Protein and fat - which for so long have been the 'bad guys' of nutrition are now okay to eat in large quantities – the Atkins diet being the classic example.

One explanation for the confusion and contradiction which exist with regard to diet, is the theory of 'body types'. This concept dates back thousands of years, to the ancient Hindus, Greeks and Romans, who recognised that people are born with different physical constitutions. Lucretius, the Roman philosopher, is credited with the saying “One man's meat is another man's poison” and there is the old nursery rhyme about Jack Sprat, who could eat no fat, and his wife who could eat no lean.

In the 1960s, Henry Bieler, in his book Food Is Your Best Medicine, classified individuals according to the dominance of their adrenal, thyroid or pituitary glands. Even before that, Dr William Sheldon had classified three basic physical types - mesomorph (muscular), ectomorph (thin) and endomorph (fleshy).

Dr Elliot Abravenal developed the 'body type diet' in the 1980s, using Bieler's adrenal, thyroid and pituitary types, and adding a fourth the gonadal type for women. Thyroid types (of which I am one) tend to be thin, sometimes underweight, during their youth and when they do put on fat it is in a roll around their middle. Thyroid types crave sweet and starchy food, which stimulate the thyroid gland. They must be careful not to overeat sugars and starches, and must build up their weak adrenal glands with light protein foods such as eggs, chicken and fish.

Thyroid types should also add butter and oils to their food, to slow down the absorption of carbohydrates. They must be particularly careful not to overdo sweets, cakes and white bread products when tired or under stress.

Adrenal types tend to be solidly built and muscular. They love red meat, nuts, salty and fatty food which stimulate the adrenal glands and given them energy. They do best on a diet which is low in fat and protein, and high in complex carbohydrates.
Pituitary types tend to look boyish or girlish even as adults, and their cravings are for dairy products, which they can get addicted to. They should avoid dairy products until they have balanced their metabolisms and the less dairy food they eat, the better. Instead, they should eat meat, fish and poultry with whole grains and vegetables.

Women who are gonadal types love spicy, creamy and oily food and their weight tends to go on their hips. They do best with a light breakfast such as fruit or cereal, a moderate lunch and their main meal at night but avoiding spicy and oily dishes.

I suspect thyroid types tend to suffer from hypoglycemia more than any other. The diet recommended for thyroid types is essentially the same as that for hypoglycaemia.

Another controversial aspect of nutrition is whether or not to take supplements. Some experts recommend a list of vitamin minerals, herbs and other supplements as long as your arm, while others say you can get all the nutrients you need from a balanced diet. I don't have any hard and fast opinion on supplements. I have tried various vitamins and minerals but never found any dramatic benefits, although I have heard of many others who attribute their recovery to a certain supplement.

Anti-oxidants are currently being promoted as a cure for virtually everything, including hypoglycemia. I have not tried anti-oxidants, largely because they are expensive and I have never liked parting with money unless I am reasonably sure of getting a good return on the investment. But I wouldn’t discourage anyone from trying anti-oxidants.

However, it is worth remembering that all supplements – even "natural" products - are essentially drugs and they do have side effects. Supplements can never take the place of a balanced moderate diet. You can't continue your old, destructive eating habits and take a supplement, expecting it to work miracles. It just doesn't work that way. It's far better - and far less expensive - to work on your diet first.

The effects of a good diet should be dramatic within a few weeks. Only then should you consider whether you need to take supplements as well.

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