

Bring Back Carrots, Potatoes and Brown Rice!

Revamping the Glycemic Index for Diabetes

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In 1981, the glycemic index was created with the hope of improving the dietary management of diabetes. The index was based on the elevation of a person's blood glucose, from a fasting state to the consumption of equal amounts of available carbohydrates from selected foods. It is used to rate carbohydrate-based foods, predicting at which rate the ingested food will increase blood sugar levels.

But the data from the index was often confusing and misleading. For example, carrots, surprisingly so, have a higher glycemic index than table sugar. Potatoes, corn and brown rice — healthy carbohydrates in their own right — were given the thumbs down because they, too, have a high glycemic index.

All carbohydrates are converted into glucose in the blood, but at different rates, and these rates depend on many factors. One critical factor is the type of food eaten with the carbohydrate. If a sugar food is eaten with a protein food, the rise and fall of the blood glucose will be considerably slower than eating the sugar food alone.

Unfortunately, the glycemic index does not take this into account. It rates foods in a solitary manner, as if each one were eaten alone. In reality, most people eat two or more food types in one sitting. Also, different people and different eating situations can provoke varying glycemic responses — how the body responds to the ingestion of carbohydrates.

So unless you eat just one food at a time, the glycemic index is not practical in its application. The American Diabetes Association has concluded that the glycemic index of a particular food is not as critical as the total amount of carbohydrates eaten in meals and snacks. Therefore, the glycemic index is NOT a dietary guide for managing diabetes.

Instead of using the glycemic index as a strong indicator of healthy eating, the American Diabetes Association recommends eating three wellbalanced meals a day with plenty of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, monounsaturated fats (such as avocados and olive oil), omega-3 polyunsaturated fats (found in salmon and flax seeds), and animal protein foods with less saturated fat (poultry, lean pork and fish). In addition, it is recommended that all people with diabetes meet with a registered dietitian to receive an individualized meal plan to improve their selfmanagement of diabetes.